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The Phantom Mazeppa; OR, The Hyena of the Chaparrals.

A Romance of Love and Adventure on
the Nebraska Plains.

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SON," "DASHING DANDY," "THE BUCK-
SKIN KING," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SONG FOR LIFE.

A YOUNG girl sat alone in an attic room, the very picture of despair, for her face was pinched with suffering, and her eyes held a hopeless look that was painful to behold.

Around her the stamp of the cruelest poverty was upon everything, for a table with a few dishes, a smoky stove, a curtain dividing the

room in half, a couple of straw-beds upon the floor, and a rickety trunk and couple of chairs were all the furniture in the room; no, not all, for, hanging to a nail on the wall was a guitar of rare workmanship, and a costly article indeed to find there.

Upon this the eyes of the young girl would turn, and then, with a sigh, her gaze would be bent once more out of the cramped window, upon the distant hills that lay far beyond the city's limits.

Presently she started, and her face flushed, for a step was heard without, the door opened, and a man entered and with a groan that seemed wrung from his heart sunk down upon the stout chair near the maiden.

"Father, your looks tell me you have been unsuccessful," she said, in a whisper, gazing upon the pale face of the man.

"Yes, our fate, Arta, is to starve!" he answered, hoarsely and with bitterness.

"No, no, father, not yet, not yet," and her eyes again fell upon the guitar hanging against the wall.

"I say yes, Arta," he replied, firmly, and then went on in a savage way:

"Yes, I, Berkley Preston, born to a life of luxury, now, ere forty years have gone over my head, am, with my only child, dying in a garret, of starvation, while around us the busy world rolls on unmindful of our hunger and our sorrow. Oh, God! Arta, my child, but this is hard indeed to bear," and he buried his face in his hands and groaned aloud.

Silently the maiden arose and approaching the wall took down the guitar, and started for the door without a word.

"Where would you go, child?" asked the father, suddenly.

"I will return soon, and with food for us both, father," she said, softly.

"No, no, not that, not that must go, my child, for well I know how you prize it."

"Yes, father, but I prize your life and mine more. I have kept it thus long hoping against hope that you might get work; but now hunger drives me to part with it, and it may bring us good luck."

She glided from the door as she spoke, and grasping the handsome guitar in her arms, descended slowly the rickety stairs.

When she gained the street she found that



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WHIRLING IT AROUND HER HEAD SHE CAST IT WITH ALL THE SKILL AND STRENGTH SHE COULD MASTER.

darkness was settling down upon the city, and the street lamps were lit; but rapidly along the narrow thoroughfare she wound her way, until she came to a shop above which hung three gilt balls, the unfailing symbol of the money-lender, and most frequently the usurer.

With a half-frightened look around her she glided into the door, and was confronted by one of the tribe of Israel leaning expectantly over the counter.

A smile of recognition crossed his face at sight of the young girl, and he said in a manner meant to be jocose:

"Goot' evenin', Mish Berkley! I ish glat to see you."

"I have come for more money, sir, and all I possess in the world I now offer you, so be generous in your loan."

She spoke coldly, and handed him the guitar, which he took with sparkling eyes, yet said quietly:

"It ish a goot instrument, my tear; vat you want on him?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Fifty? I give you ten tollar."

"No, it cost, I know, over a hundred, and I must have more."

"It ish not vat it cost, my tear, but vat it vill bring."

"Give me forty then, Mr. Jacobs."

"I give you twelve tollar."

"Mr. Jacobs, money could not buy this instrument from me, were it not that my father and myself are—yes, *starving*," and the words choked her.

"Dat ish pad, my tear; I ish sorry mit my heart for you, but my monish ish sorry just twelve tollar."

"I ask not your sympathy, nor am I a beggar for your money, as I give you as security what you well know is worth many times the sum you offer; it was the gift of one I admire and regard most highly."

"I cannot pay you for t'e sentiment ant t'e friendship, my tear; but I give you fifteen tollar."

With an impatient toss of her haughty head she took up the guitar and turned away.

The Jew called out to her with a more generous offer, but unheeding him, she left the shop, muttering:

"It is a long walk, and I do not feel very strong, as I have not eaten anything to-day, but old Simons will certainly give me more."

At a rapid pace she went along, and, apparently thoroughly acquainted with the city, she shortened the way by a cut through the fashionable quarter.

Suddenly she halted in front of a large and imposing structure from which bright lights shone in abundance, and through the open windows of which she beheld a number of forms moving to and fro.

"There must be men there who would help me did they know my want; but then, even my short life has shown me that they would ask a price. No, no, there must be men in the world who are not all vile, and who have some heart. Ha! I will try it, ere I part with this treasure," and she passionately kissed the guitar.

Stepping quickly to the shadow of a tree growing in front of the fashionable club-house, for such it was, the young girl placed the ribbon attached to the guitar around her neck, and after a moment spent in tuning the instrument, ran her fingers over the strings with a skill that showed she was no ordinary performer.

At first hearing the notes the young aristocrats in the club-rooms feared they were to be treated to some discordant lay from a street musician, and one young swell had already thrust his hand in his pocket to buy off the disturber; but when, suddenly, a rich, fine soprano voice burst forth in song, a hush fell upon all in the elegant rooms, and men pressed toward the windows to catch a glimpse of the fair songstress, for one with such a voice must be fair, all felt.

But back in the shadow of the tree she stood, her face unseen, while the gold on her guitar, and the inlaying of pearl, glittered like precious stones, as they caught the flashes of light from the windows.

What she sung she hardly knew, for the grief and pain in her heart had seemed to burst forth in some song of plaintive melody to relieve her own pent-up emotions; but she sung with an exquisite pathos, and her voice was one that would have brought an *encore* on an operatic stage, and the "curled darlings of society," the fashionable club *habitués*, pressed closer to the window, and listened in spellbound silence.

At last the song ended and those who had listened feared she would go; but no; she still lingered, and an instrumental piece followed.

"Now, gentlemen, that is worth as much as a ticket to the opera, and I will be the collector for the fair songstress," cried a young and handsome aristocrat, and taking off his hat he threw into it a twenty-dollar bill, and passing through the crowd quickly collected quite a large sum, for all hoped to induce the singer to favor them with another song.

As the self-appointed collector stepped out upon the marble stairway of the club, the

young girl again broke forth in song, and this time it was a lively French air, for she had seen the collection being made for her, and felt that she must sing gayly.

As she began her second song a tall form crossed the street and halted in the shadow of a tree near by, just as the young clubite approached the maiden, his hat held forth with the liberal donation he had collected.

And, as she sung, he gazed upon her and saw that she was very beautiful, and that her eyes were sad and dreamy in spite of the lively strain and words of her song, while her form, though poorly clad, was faultless and graceful in every motion.

"A sweet bird for my gilded cage, and I shall not allow so fair a songstress to escape me," he muttered, his evil heart throbbing with admiration at the beauty of the singer.

At length the song ended, and stepping quickly forward the young aristocrat said:

"Charmed with your voice, fair girl, myself and friends beg you to accept this little offering, while I, delighted with your beauty and the sweetness of your tones, will offer you a home to dwell in, take you from the streets, and give you the devotion you deserve."

She started back like a frightened bird, for what could his words mean but insult to her?

"Sir! I am in distress, and sung here to save my father and myself from starvation; but I want not your gold, stained as it is with insult."

Her voice rung with anger and she turned to go, when, maddened by her beauty, and flushed with wine, he sprang forward and grasped her hand, while he cried eagerly:

"No, no, you shall not cast me off. You are poor, as your street-singing proves; I am rich, and my sweet songstress shall dwell in a cage of gold, if so she will."

"Unhand me, sir!"

"Not until you say I may see you again."

"Never—Ha!"

She started back as the grasp upon her hand was released, for a tall form, the same that had before crossed the street, had sprang forward, and a heavy blow, full in the face of the aristocrat, had sent him sprawling upon the pavement.

"Here, miss, take this, and with it goes no insult," said the stranger, and he forced into the hand of the young girl a roll of bills, just as her insulter arose to his feet, and a score of his companions rushed out of the Club, having seen what had happened, yet not understanding it.

With a cry of rage the young aristocrat, an acknowledged athlete among his associates, sprang upon his assailant, to again measure his length upon the ground, while the stranger cried in ringing tones, seeing the hostile attitude of others toward him:

"Hold! I am not to be bullied, gentlemen. That man grossly insulted a lady, and I punished him for it, and I warn you back, for I am armed."

This caused an instant halt among the hostiles; but Carter Conrad, the one whom he had twice punished, had again risen to his feet, and hissed forth:

"You shall answer for this, sir."

"Better not ask it of me; but if you wish it I will oblige you, and I can be found at the Park Hotel; my name is Lucien De Leon, and I hail from Texas."

He raised the broad sombrero from his head politely, and turned, as though to offer his protection further to the young girl; but she had glided silently away, and was nowhere visible, and the Texan walked up the street with that certain air of conscious power in one's self, that caused a number to remark among the Club members that Carter Conrad, dead shot and athlete that he was, would do well to let his quarrel with Lucien De Leon drop just where it stood.

CHAPTER II.

A SURPRISE.

SURPRISED and pained at what she had unintentionally done to cause a quarrel, Arta Preston, acting from a sudden impulse she could not control, turned and fled from the scene, where trouble was brewing, and never slackened her steps until she sunk, panting and frightened in the room where her father sat, his face buried in his hands.

"Arta, my child, what has happened?" he cried, in alarm, springing to his feet, and hastily lighting a piece of tallow candle and then turning toward her.

With an effort she gained her self-control, and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Papa, I left here determined to pawn my guitar, and went to Jacobs's; but though he has so many of our things he would only offer me a pittance, and I left him to go to Simons's, and passing the Union Club, an impulse I cannot explain seized upon me to sing before the open windows."

"Oh, Arta, my child, what have you done?"

"Nothing that I am ashamed of, father," she answered, proudly.

"But once I belonged to that Club, child, and—"

"I know it, sir, but it was years ago before you lost your fortune, and I was a wee child then, and none of your former aristocratic friends know me; but I sung there before the windows, and my voice raised for me what appeared to be a liberal donation, but he who brought it cruelly insulted me, and—"

"Ha! poor as I am, a beggar, a vagabond, he shall answer for it, be he who he may!" cried Berkley Preston, with savage earnestness.

"He has already been punished, sir."

"And by whom?"

"A gentleman who stood in the street and listened to my song, and whose striking face and form attracted my attention. He crossed the street, and when the one who pretended to serve me insulted me, he struck him to the ground."

"Indeed! Then he has my heartfelt thanks; but, did you know him, Arta?"

"No, father, not then, but now I recall his face, and did so as I fled from the spot, for, at his act the members of the Club ran out to aid their fallen companion."

"I hope no harm befell your defender."

"I think not, sir, for I looked back and saw that they did not attack him."

"And you know him, you say?"

"I recall him from the past, though I have not seen him for five years."

"And who is he, Arta?"

"Do you remember, father, after your loss of fortune, we went to dwell in a little cottage on the river?"

"Can I ever forget it, Arta! It was there your mother died," said the man, sadly.

"Yes, sir; and you remember one night a stranger asked shelter from the storm, and that I sung for him, playing an accompaniment upon Black Tom's banjo?"

"Yes, and he it was who was so struck with your voice, though you were but thirteen then, that he sent you the very guitar that you hold there."

"Yes, father, and his name and mine are upon it now, and he is the one who defended me to-night."

"Impossible, Arta! That young gentleman dwelt in Texas, he said."

"Well, sir, he is to night in Boston, and he wore a broad Mexican sombrero, and was dressed as the Southern planters dress, and I know that it was Lucien De Leon."

"I will go at once and seek him! No, no, I cannot—I dare not, for I am but a tramp in appearance," he added, bitterly, and then noticing that she clasped something tightly in her hand, he continued:

"What have you there, Arta?"

She glanced at her hand, and her face flushed crimson as her eyes fell upon the roll of bills the Texan had forced into her grasp, and the very existence of which she had forgotten.

"Oh, father! he gave me these, and I had forgotten it."

Berkley Preston seized the bills eagerly, and rapidly his eyes ran over the figures, while he said, in a voice that trembled:

"Who gave you this money, Arta?"

"He did; Lucien De Leon. He thrust the bills into my hand."

"There are two hundred dollars here."

It was her turn to start, now, and she said, quickly:

"Father, you must seek him out and return this money."

Berkley Preston paced to and fro a moment in deep thought, and then said, slowly:

"No, Arta, I will not seek him out now, but at another day I will. This money has saved your life and mine, for, seeing only sorrow and starvation before us, I had determined to take your life and mine, and thus end our misery."

"Oh, father! would you do such a coward's act?" she said, reproachfully.

"I had fully determined that we should no longer suffer the pangs of hunger; but this roll of bills gives me a new lease on life, for it will carry us out to the home of one who must and shall give us a support, for, what I am he made me."

"You refer to your cousin, Ramsey Preston?"

"Yes; he is one of the cattle kings of Nebraska, and rolls in wealth, and to him we will go, and this very night we will start, for we have nothing to pack up that will delay us," and Berkley Preston smiled bitterly as he glanced around the poverty-stamped room, and then into his face came firm resolve not to die like a coward, but to live like a man.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE REQUEST.

A MAN sat reading in a comfortable room of a Boston hotel, and, as he raised his face, it was the same resolute one that had confronted Carter Conrad the night before.

Handsome as a painting, every feature being perfect, there was yet that in the bronzed face to indicate a man of determined resolve and utter fearlessness, while his superb form, with its slender waist and broad shoulders, indicated a strength and activity that was far above the average.

As though liking his ease, he wore a dressing-

gown, smoking-cap, and slippers, and, as he glanced over the morning papers, puffed away at a fragrant cigar, while the small remnants of a breakfast on an adjoining table proved that his appetite was not satiated by city life.

About the room were scattered articles of various kinds, to prove his claim to being a plainsman, for there were visible upon a chair a buckskin, dyed quill and bead-embroidered, hunting-shirt, and fringed leggings, moccasins, and a broad-brimmed, gold worked sombrero lay upon a table, while in the corner stood a pair of handsome cavalry boots, with spurs upon them, that seemed exceedingly small and shapely to fit the foot of a man six feet in height.

A belt of gold-mounted revolvers and carved-handled bowie-knife were on a lounge, across which also lay a repeating rifle, and it was evident that all had seen service, as had also a splendid Mexican saddle and hair bridle that were visible in an open trunk.

A tap at the door caused the occupant to turn to the rightabout and face the portal, with the air of a man ever on the alert to receive a foe, and then he said quietly:

"Come in!"

The door opened and a youth entered hesitatingly, and gazed upon the inmate of the room with a strange look.

A youth it was, and yet one of womanly beauty, for his dark-blue eyes seemed to fascinate by their glance, and his lips were but partially hidden in their beautiful outline by a slight mustache.

He was well dressed, wore a slouch hat, which he did not remove upon entering, and modestly stood near the door, while he asked in a low tone:

"You are Mr. De Leon, I believe?"

"Yes, Lucien De Leon; can I serve you in any way?" and the Texan spoke in a kindly tone and arose.

"Yes, it is to ask you to do me a great service that I have come here."

"Well, I will do all that I can, for I keep my purse-strings ready to pull on for any one in real trouble. Been bucking the tiger and got scratched, I suppose?" said Lucien De Leon, in his free-and-easy way.

But the words caused the youth to flush crimson, and he said quickly:

"You are mistaken, sir, for I do not come to you for money, as I am no gambler."

"Ah! feared you were, as boys are not slow nowadays in my country. It's a girl in the case, a quarrel then, or something of that kind, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir, it is a quarrel and there is a girl in the case," was the frank reply.

"I might have known it. A woman is generally at the bottom of all troubles; but speak out, and if I can serve you I will, my young friend, though I do not know you; but then, a true plainsman don't wait for introductions before he lends a hand to a pard in distress."

"I believe such to be your nature, sir, and from what I heard of you, I came to see you to ask the favor I intend to."

"Why, my boy, I don't know half a dozen people in your town, so how could you have heard of me?"

"You had two visitors this morning?"

"Ah, yes; do you know them?" asked the Texan, quickly.

"I do; one was Roscoe Hume, and the other Benton Vail, and they are fast young aristocrats who are going rapidly down-hill, and will reach the bottom with their last dollar."

"You seem to judge them rightly. Now tell me, do you know why they came to see me?"

"I do; as the seconds of Carter Conrad, whom you knocked down last night."

"True, and I have not done with him yet, for a man as base at heart as he is had better fill a grave than occupy space on earth."

There was that in the Texan's eye which showed he would have no mercy for Carter Conrad, and the youth saw it, and said quickly:

"You accepted his challenge, then?"

"Yes; but, young man, let me tell you that you are devilish inquisitive in a matter that, as yet, I cannot see concerns you, and, as Boston is not Texas, where we act untrammelled in such little affairs, I shall decline to say more, until I know your right to question."

"Ah, sir, you need say no more than you have, for I know that you and Carter Conrad are to meet in a duel, and I feel that you will kill him."

"I am not one to waste powder, my boy."

The youth looked pained, and dropped his head for an instant, and then said:

"Are you aware that he is a dead shot?"

"I have heard he rings the bell at every shot, pard; but target-shooting and aiming at a human being who holds a bead on you are very different, I assure you, and if he is quicker than I am on the shoot, he's welcome to my scalp, as others have been but didn't get it."

The youth seemed to feel that the man before him had too often faced death to fear to meet it again, so said pleadingly:

"But you will grant me the favor I came to ask of you?"

"If in my power, yes."

After a moment's hesitation the young visitor said slowly:

"It is that you will not fight this duel."

"By the Lone Star of Texas! but this is a request I cannot grant, and in my country we would say you had the cheek of a Government mule to ask it."

"I know I ask a great deal, sir, but I beg of you not to carry this affair on."

"Boy, the matter rests just here: a young girl, a street musician, halted before a clubhouse last night, and, struck with the beauty of her voice, I stopped to listen, and heard her insulted by this Carter Conrad, who had raised some money for her. It's in my nature to chip in on the weak side, and I introduced a Texas fist to Mr. Conrad's Boston face, and so he challenges me to run up into Canada and give him satisfaction, and as I came East for a good time, I have promised to oblige him, and our arrangements are all made."

"And you intend to kill him?"

"I do not intend that he shall kill me."

"Oh, sir, do not fight this duel I beg, I implore of you," and springing forward the youth grasped the arm of the Texan and looked imploringly into his face.

"What is Conrad to you, boy pard?"

"He is—everything," was the impulsive answer.

"That's a good deal; but I cannot back down now, so you must get him to crawfish."

"He will not do it."

"Then why should I?"

"Because I ask you not to kill him."

"I am sorry, but I cannot oblige you," was the cold reply.

The youth hesitated a moment and then seeing that the Texan was decided, said softly:

"I told you that Carter was everything to me, and I spoke the truth, for I am not what I seem; I am his wife!"

Lucien De Leon started, and looked down into the beautiful face, for with one hand the visitor had removed a false mustache, with the other the slouch hat, and a wealth of golden curls fell upon the shoulders.

"Saints and sinners! but you are a woman and a beautiful one too," cried the Texan, in amazement.

"Yes, I sought this disguise so that I would not be known, for I heard Carter make all his plans with his seconds."

"And you are his wife?"

"Yes, sir; but, do not betray the secret, for the world does not know me as such, for he cannot tell the secret for fear his father will disinherit him."

"The devil is worse than a Mexican Greaser to deceive you so! Better let me make you a widow and then marry you myself."

"No, no, for I love him."

"You do? Well, he don't deserve it, and a little cold lead will improve his morals."

"No, no, sir; I have trusted you, and you know my secret, so spare his life, for if he dies it will kill me, as he is all I have to love."

"And he is worse than nothing. Now don't get angry, for I intend to do as you ask and crawfish out of this affair, as you are too pretty and sweet to die, and he's too wicked to live."

Her reply was to burst into tears, and for a moment she sobbed convulsively with joy; but, after awhile she controlled herself and said:

"Oh, sir, you have saved his life and mine, and from my inmost heart I thank you. You will keep your word, will you not?"

"Yes; I will write him a note saying that I cannot meet him, and to-night will start for Nebraska, where I am going to establish a cattle ranch, and—"

"To Nebraska, and to establish a cattle-ranch?" she said, falteringly.

"Yes, I got one of my cow-boys to go up and homestead me a ranch there some time ago, and I am on my way there now, having only run up this way to enjoy a little look at the Eastern country; but, I'll skip for Nebraska to-night."

"But Carter owns a cattle-ranch out there too!"

"Indeed! Then I hope it don't join mine, for that man and I could never be pards. Now don't ask me to give up the cattle business and go back to Texas, for I cannot."

"Oh, sir, I pray that you two may never meet."

"Amen, if so it pleases you. Now hide that pretty mouth under that false mustache, and those curls beneath your hat, and wish me God speed, or I'll have that fellow after me for running off with his wife, and to please you, will have to let him kill me."

The woman took the hint, resumed her disguise, and said:

"From my heart I thank you, and you will never be forgotten by Pauline Enders."

"Enders! I thought you were Mrs. Conrad."

"Alas! I dare not claim my name."

"I forgot, on account of your husband's villainy. Good-by!"

She took his hand in both her own, bent quickly over and kissed it, and turning glided from the room, while the Texan muttered:

"Poor girl, I pity her; but now to write this note to Conrad, and then, ho for Nebraska! But, if he crosses my path out there—well, never

mind, I will not threaten," and the Texan set to work packing up for his trip to the plains of Nebraska.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LONE RANCH.

To the northward a range of hills, and at their base, winding along—its banks fringed with cottonwoods and willows—a crystal stream; to the southward an almost boundless expanse of prairie, only here and there broken with a clump of timber.

In the shelter of one of these timber islands was a rude cabin, strongly built, facing the south, and commanding a vast view of plainland, upon which were visible a large herd of cattle feeding, while closer in toward the stream was a band of bardy prairie horses, the mustangs so highly prized by both rancheros and Indians.

No other habitation was in sight, and here dwelt but three beings.

It was a comfortable home withal, considering that it was beyond the borders of civilization, and that it was miles away to the nearest ranch; and yet, with all its real home comforts, it was not noted as a hospitable roof, as the wandering hunter, the prowling red-skin and the chance traveler had never found shelter there.

One of the three dwellers in the stout cabin was a man of forty perhaps, with a dark, bearded face, stern, yet by no means forbidding, as a world of fascination dwelt in the lustrous dark eyes, and at times a kindly look swept over the features; but, generally, the thoughts of the man seemed back in the past, dwelling upon some bygone memory of wrong or sorrow, and he held a restless look, as though he ever dreaded some evil.

He was dressed in a hunting suit of stout yet rich material, boots, and a sombrero that slouched down over his face, giving it a darker look than otherwise it would have worn, and he wore with habitual caution a belt of arms.

Another dweller in that border ranch was a woman—one whose appearance would indicate that she was sadly out of place there, for her form was exquisitely graceful and willowy, and her face beautiful in the extreme; but it was a dark, imperious beauty that would awe rather than win admiration.

Perhaps she had seen thirty summers, and yet she might be much younger, and there was that about her, in spite of her half-civilized, half-Indian attire, that would indicate her as having been brought up among far different scenes, and proven herself a queen among women.

The third denizen of this frontier domicile was a half-breed, for in his veins was the blood of the Comanche Indian as well as that of the Mexican, and his form, clad in the fanciful costume of the land beyond the Rio Grande, was as sinewy as a panther's, and his motions as noiseless as a snake's, while his darkly bronzed face and piercing eyes proved him to possess a courage that was undaunted, and a heart that was merciless toward a foe.

Within, the cabin contained three rooms, and along the walls of each were ranged rifles and pistols, proving that the defenders could meet well an attack.

Ingeniously made easy-chairs, tables and settees, with well-dressed skins of bears, deers and buffalo made the rooms comfortable, while shelves of books against the wall, a Spanish guitar, flute and china tableware were evidences of real luxury.

When presented to the reader the woman was indolently reclining in a Mexican hammock, swung between two trees in front of the cabin, and in one hand she held a book, but was not reading.

The tall, heavily-bearded man was seated near, plaiting a lariat of rawhide, and the half-breed was making a saddle-girth out of horse-hair.

Suddenly the eagle eye of the half-breed became fixed upon a distant object, and observing his intent gaze, the American, for such he seemed, asked:

"What is it, Sancho?"

"A horseman."

"Ah!" and the American arose quickly, took from a bucket in the wall of the cabin a spy-glass and leveled it upon the stranger.

"A white man—alone, and he comes this way," he muttered, and his words caused the woman to rise from her indolent posture, and ask:

"Can you see his face?"

"No, he looks downward, and it is hidden by his sombrero; but he is splendidly mounted, well armed, as I can see, and this ranch is his destination."

"He is alone, you say?"

"Yes, Alita."

"Then we have nothing to fear," and she dropped back in the hammock.

"Not if there came a score at his back; but his trail leads by this ranch, or—"

"Or what?" she asked, as he paused, while a dark frown swept over his face.

"Or ends here!"

In the mean time the stranger was drawing

nearer and nearer to the ranch, his horse coming on at an easy lope, and scattering right and left the herds that were in his path.

After awhile he ascended the roll of the prairie upon which stood the ranch, and with his head still bowed, as if to avoid recognition, rode up to the cabin, and drew rein not ten paces from the group of three, who, with dark faces, as if they hated to have their house visited, regarded him.

A man of superb physique, dressed in the Mexican costume, armed to the teeth, and mounted upon a splendid black stallion, he presented a striking picture; but there was that in his face which attracted more attention, and brought a cry of horror from the three dwellers at the lonely ranch, while from the lips of the woman came the wailing cry:

"Holy Virgin! it is Bianca, and we are lost!"

In distinct tones, and from lips that wore a devilish smile, came the response:

"Ay, traitors, I am Bianca, and I have trailed you to your doom!"

CHAPTER V. FACING FATE.

A SILENCE, such as might follow a death-shot, ensued after the fateful words of the stranger to the three denizens of the lone ranch on the Birdwood.

The eyes of the American and the woman drooped before his burning gaze, but in the glitter that dwelt in the orbs of the Mexican, there was a look that few could fathom.

And in that moment of silence, an observer, had there been one to gaze upon the scene, would have been struck with one circumstance—the startling resemblance between the stranger and the ranchero.

They were alike in form, and one was seemingly the counterpart of the other in feature, unless there dwelt a more kindly look in the face of the ranchero.

That kindred blood flowed in their veins was certain, or nature had made two men strangely alike.

And yet, though the stranger was but one, the others three, he had dared to ride up to their very door and threaten them, and they seemingly had not dared retaliate.

There was some significant mystery in all this, for the one cowed the three; at least not one of the three had resented his bold words.

At length, he whom the woman had called Bianca, broke the painful silence:

"You thought not to see me more," he said—"that in the wild plains of Nebraska, as simple herders, you would not be found by me. But you, Ramsey Preston, should have known me better, and felt that Bianca was not one to leave a trail of revenge until the end was reached.

"Well, here I am, and the end of the trail is reached, and what now?"

He fastened his eyes upon the ranchero and waited for a reply.

Soon it came, and it was but a repetition of his own words:

"Yes, what now?"

"What shall it be, Ramsey Preston?"

"What shall it be, Bianca?" was the low response.

The stranger turned toward the woman who stood near, her face pallid, her eyes burning, and her bosom heaving, and asked:

"Alita, what punishment must follow this treachery?"

She raised her eyes fearlessly to his and answered:

"You are the judge and executioner, Bianca; do your worst."

"Ah, my proud beauty, I have never seen that heart of your's quail, but I think now it will quiver with anguish and dread," he said, in a tone of deepest menace.

She shuddered, but her eyes remained defiant, while Ramsey Preston said earnestly:

"Visit upon me the punishment and spare her."

"Bah! To see you die alone would be but half my joy in revenge! No, no! The blow must fall upon both: death to you—a worse fate to her!"

"A worse fate?" and she looked her surprise.

"What can be worse than death?"

"You shall see. Come, Ramsey Preston, I would see you alone, and in the very comfortable cabin which you have built for yourself in this remote place."

He dismounted, seemingly with no dread of evil to himself, although he boldly threatened them, and leaving his splendid horse standing unfastened, walked toward the cabin, turning his back unhesitatingly upon the group.

Silently Ramsey Preston, as white as a corpse, followed him, and the two were alone together, the woman standing like a statue outside, and the Mexican still mechanically plaiting the horse-hair saddle-girth.

"Sit there, sir," ordered the stranger, when the two were alone together.

Silently the ranchero obeyed, sinking into a bear-skin chair.

The stranger remained standing. Then a silence fell between the two, and it seemed to Ramsey Preston, to judge from his suffering,

pallid face, that he had come there to face a doom he could not avert, though he was faced only by one man, and help was within call.

At last the stranger broke the dread silence: "You have done well in the five years that have passed since last we met, Ramsey Preston!"

"How mean you?"

"You have gained much in worldly wealth—you are called a Nebraska cattle-king?"

"I know what I am called."

"Men say you are inhospitable—that no latch-string hangs on the outside of your door to welcome the stranger, and none of your brother rancheros have ever entered your cabin."

"I cared only to live within myself."

"Bah! fear prompted that desire, for you cared not to be traced. Men here buy their cattle in Texas, and you feared the story might go there that you had fled hither. What do men call you here, Ramsey Preston?"

"I am known by my proper name. I have met few of the rancheros; I drove my herd here, built my cabin, and here I have lived, while Sancho is my herdsman and dwells in another ranch on the Birdwood, coming hither when so he pleases."

"Ah! you have indeed done well; two herds then you have?" inquiringly said the stranger.

"You are rich in cattle, then?"

"Yes."

"And must give all up?"

The ranchero started, but made no reply.

"Must give all up, for you are to die, I said," repeated the stranger, and still the ranchero remained silent. "Have you no wish to live?"

"I care not," was the indifferent reply.

"You have no heir, I believe?"

"None, and yet there is one to whom I would leave my wealth."

"You mean that portion of it which I do not claim."

"Hal! you then intend to claim my riches?" asked the ranchero, quickly.

"Why not?"

"I might have expected it; but, as I have wronged you, I make no resistance, for I have schooled myself to accept my fate without a sigh; but, Bianca, as I have wronged you, so did I wrong another, yet not in the same way."

"And that other?"

"Was my cousin, Berk Preston, who sacrificed his fortune to save me, and yet I brought financial ruin upon him, and dragged him down to beggary. Now, I am rich again, and he is poor, and one to whom I wrote in the East regarding him has just written me, for only yesterday Sancho brought me the letter from the Platte, that Berkley had started to Nebraska with his only child, a daughter."

"A daughter, say you?" asked the stranger, quickly.

"Yes, and my informant says she is very beautiful. I know that she was so as a child, and to her I wish to leave the Birdwood ranch and herd."

"Which is the most valuable—this one or that one?"

"This is, for the herd doubles the other in numbers."

"So be it; it shall be as you desire: Berkley Preston's daughter shall have the Birdwood ranch," and a strange smile crossed the face of the speaker, which Ramsey Preston did not see.

Again a silence fell between them, and then it was broken by the stranger with:

"Come, Ramsey Preston, come out and dig your grave, for within the hour you die."

CHAPTER VI.

A VICTIM OF HATE.

WHEN the stranger spoke the fateful words, without hesitation Ramsey Preston arose and followed him out of the cabin.

Already were the shadows of night falling upon the prairie, and a deeper gloom seemed settling upon the hearts of the dwellers in the lone ranch.

"Alita, you have a white horse that is said to be fleetest than the wind, and obeys only your voice," and the stranger turned toward the woman who leaned against one of the trees between which the hammock hung, her eyes bent upon the ground, and her whole attitude that of one who was communing with the past and reckless of the future.

She started at his words and asked:

"How know you this, Bianca?"

"As I know other things regarding you; I follow no blind trail, Alita."

She shuddered, but making no reply he continued:

"Where is your matchless horse?"

"On the prairie."

"Let Sancho bring him here."

"He will not obey Sancho."

"Then go yourself and fetch him."

"You do not fear to trust me?" she asked, sneeringly.

"No."

"Remember, Phantom runs like the very wind."

"I care not."

"He is untiring."

"It matters not."

"Once upon his back and nothing could ever catch me."

"I will trust you; you dare not fly from me," he said, firmly.

"I will not, at least; I shrink not from my fate," and slipping into the cabin she soon returned with a small silver bugle, upon which she blew a few loud, clear, ringing notes.

A distant neigh from the gathering darkness answered the call, and soon after came the fall of hoofs, and up to the cabin dashed a steed of rare beauty, and whose long, gaunt body, slender limbs, and slender, arched neck, gave evidence of wonderful speed, strength and endurance.

Trotting up to the woman he laid his head against her shoulder, and she fondled him affectionately.

"He is a splendid animal, and I intend that he shall bear you on a journey," said he whom they had called Bianca.

She glanced at him in surprise, but, unheeding her look, he turned to the half-breed, and said:

"Sancho, put these irons upon this man."

He drew from his saddle-pocket, for his noble black still stood patiently where he had left him, a pair of handcuffs, and without a word the Mexican obeyed the order, Ramsey Preston holding out his hands with a resignation that was surprising.

"Now pass that lariat around him, and bind him to that tree."

Quietly the Mexican obeyed, meeting with no opposition from the victim.

"Alita, when I have sent you on your journey, then shall Ramsey Preston dig his own grave, and, bound hand and foot, into it he goes alive."

Even the Mexican started at the horrible words of Bianca, for savage as was his nature, the white man surpassed him in diabolical cruelty.

And, at the words, a groan broke from the lips of Ramsey Preston, while Alita cried:

"Inhuman devil, visit upon me what fate you wish, but spare him."

"As both have sinned, so both shall suffer, and, fearful as the doom I intend for Ramsey Preston, yours shall be even worse," and he fixed his glittering eyes upon her with a look of malicious triumph.

"Man, fiend, or whatever you may be, I have submitted before in silence, for I felt that I deserved punishment at your hands; but, now, even the worm trodden beneath your heel shall turn. You are free, Sancho! Alita, free me, and we will try our might with this devil."

Loud rung the words of Ramsey Preston, and the woman seemed about to obey, but the Mexican remained calm and unmoved, and a defiant laugh broke from the lips of Bianca, who answered:

"You are too late to turn against me, Ramsey Preston, and no power can save you, now, or this woman, from the fate I intend for you."

"Seize that woman, Sancho!"

The Mexican sprang upon Alita, as a panther upon its prey, and held her firmly in his iron gripe, while Bianca threw a lasso over the head of the white steed and quickly choked him down.

Then, upon the back of the noble animal he skillfully bound the woman, aided by the Mexican, who served him well, from inclination or fear, it was hard to tell which.

With her head resting upon the neck, her body upon the back of the horse, she was secured in a way that it would be impossible to dislodge her, and with no resistance upon her part, for, realizing the fearful fate that was to be hers, she had fainted away.

Bitter, loud and fearful, were the curses that broke from the lips of Ramsey Preston, as, with staring eyes and corpse-like face, he watched the hellish proceedings; but, unheeding his words, Bianca worked on until all was secure, and then he permitted the steed to rise to his feet, and then, with a loud cry, like the shriek of a madman, set him loose on the prairie.

A frightened neigh, a shriek of terror from the now-conscious woman, a groan of agony from Ramsey Preston, and the white steed bounded away like the very wind, and disappeared like a fading phantom in the gloom of night!

"Now it is your turn, Ramsey Preston."

The voice of the speaker was savage in its intensity, and Bianca turned toward the victim bound to the tree, and groaning in anguish of spirit for the woman who had been so foully dealt with.

But, ere he took half a dozen steps toward his victim, there came a series of wild shouts, the clatter of hoofs, whirring of arrows through the air, and a score or more of mounted warriors dashed down upon the ranch.

"Cut him loose, Sancho! He shall fight for my life!" yelled Bianca, as he wheeled and poured shot after shot from his repeating-rifle upon the advancing Sioux, while the Mexican, obeying, dragged the still ironed victim into the cabin, and was followed by Bianca, leading his noble black, just as the red-skins checked their charge under the murderous fire of the desperate devil that had confronted them.

CHAPTER VII.

LOST.

"Oh father! must the same fate meet us here that threatened us in civilization?"

"It seems so, my child; would to Heaven I had died long ere I brought this sorrow upon you," and Berkley Preston bent his head in deepest dejection, for to him there seemed not one hope in life.

With the money received by Arta, the night of her adventure in front of the aristocratic Club in Boston, they had come to the Far West on emigrants' tickets, and Berkley Preston had written his relative Ramsey, and sent it on by pony express, that he and his child were coming to seek his aid, and a home with him.

Arriving at Leavenworth they had been compelled to sacrifice Arta's highly-prized guitar for more means, for they needed horses, saddles and bridles, and procuring them, with blankets, and such other things as were necessary for their trip, they had joined several emigrant families going to Denver, intending to leave them when they arrived in the vicinity of the Platte, and thus find their way on to Preston's ranch, which they knew to be somewhere in the vicinity of Platte City, a hamlet just then springing into existence.

There were several others who took advantage of the emigrant train going west to join it for company and protection, and one of these was a young man of striking appearance, but who possessed a face that was reckless in the extreme, and strongly marked with dissipation and evil.

He had a companion with him, a small, wiry, dark-faced, strangely handsome man, who was dressed like a border dandy, and seemed even as neat as though he had just rigged himself up for a masquerade.

Both were splendidly mounted and armed thoroughly, and certainly were possessed of courage and prairie skill as guides; but from the first Arta took an aversion to both of them, though why she could not tell, as they were ever most kind to her.

As they progressed on their way westward Arta found that the young man first described, and who gave his name as Mert Mabrey, a Col-oradian, possessed a fine education, sung well, played the guitar with a master hand, and could be a most agreeable companion at times, while his companion, Tiny Tim, the Mustang, as he was called, seldom spoke, and seemed ever brooding over his own troubles, whatever they might be.

After selling her own guitar, and for a good sum, Arta had purchased a cheap, inferior instrument, to while away the evenings in camp with, and the first day out it got broken, but was most skillfully mended by Mert Mabrey, whose performance upon the instrument was the first step toward removing the dislike she had formed for the wild but handsome young plainsman.

A good rider, Arta needed no instructions in horsemanship, but he taught her how to shoot both pistol and rifle, and to throw a lariat, which bold accomplishments she learned readily, apparently with a natural aptitude for such things.

It was the habit of Mr. Preston to take a long gallop with Arta each morning over the prairie, and when thus alone they would talk over the past, and plot for the future, for they did not doubt but that they would receive a warm welcome from Ramsey Preston.

In these rides they seldom lost sight of the train on the march, for they were not skilled yet in finding their way upon the prairies; but one morning they rode further than was their wont, and turning to retrace their way beheld the train nowhere in sight.

To add to their discomfort at this discovery a storm was sweeping rapidly up from the westward, and they rode rapidly to a piece of timber for shelter.

But, when the storm broke, at last, it continued with fury for hours, and they were compelled to remain in their place of refuge, for their stubborn little mustangs would not face the fury of the tempest, and when at last it subsided night was falling upon the prairie.

Completely bewildered, not knowing which was north or south, or in which direction the train lay, they were forced to camp in the timber for the night, and tediously indeed dragged the long hours away, little sleep coming to either father or daughter.

With the glimmer of dawn they arose and started on their search for the train; but it was a blind search, for they knew not which way to go, and all day long wandered hopelessly about, often crossing and recrossing their own trail.

Wearied almost to death, hungry, for they had had nothing to eat, Arta at length gave expression to the words that open this chapter, and which brought forth her father's despondent reply.

"They certainly will look for us, father," said Arta, after awhile.

"They will not know where to look, and could not find us if they did."

"Yes, Mert Mabrey can follow a trail like an

Indian, they say, and he will not let us die here, I know."

"I would almost rather see you perish with me here, Arta, than have you owe your life to that man," said her father, with sudden severity.

"Why, father, what has he done to so arouse your dislike?" asked the maiden, in surprise.

"Nothing, and yet everything; he has won your love, my child."

"Father!" and the eyes flashed as she turned them upon her parent.

"I have seen it all along, Arta, the weeks we have been upon the march; he loves you desperately."

"Is that my loving him, father?"

"No, but you must confess that you are deeply interested in him."

"Yes, he interests me, and I pity him, for I feel that he is worthy a better life than the one he leads; but I fear him; I do not love him, father, and would be glad at heart had I never met him, for ever in his presence a presentiment of evil rises before me."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Arta; now what of this Tiny Tim, the Mustang?"

"I know not what to think of him; he seldom speaks to me, or, in fact, to any one excepting Mert Mabrey, and somehow I cannot believe that he is the friend he professes to be."

"To Mabrey?"

"Yes, sir."

"So I think, for at times I have seen him look at Mabrey with an expression that was almost fiendish; but come, it is almost sunset, and we must seek a camp in yonder timber, and then see what the morrow will bring for us. Ha! there is some one moving in the timber yonder."

Both drew rein quickly, and after gazing an instant attentively, Arta said:

"I see no human being, only a horse, and he is saddled and bridled. Yes, and it is Mert Mabrey's splendid bay; and, father, that is the same piece of timber where we stayed last night, and the plainsman has trailed us there. Come, for we are saved."

In spite of his dislike for Mert Mabrey this was glad news for Berkley Preston, and the father and daughter urged their tired mustangs forward at a gallop, and soon drew rein in the timber, while a cry broke from the lips of each at what they beheld.

And no wonder, for the splendid bay of Mabrey was lariatd to a stake driven deep into the ground at the head of a new-made grave, and no human form was there to greet them!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS MAZEPPA.

"GREAT God! what can this mean?"

The cry broke from the lips of Berkley Preston, at sight of the grave before him and the horse, whose presence there seemed to indicate who lay beneath the mound at his feet.

"Father, it must be Mert Mabrey that lies there!" cried Arta.

"It can be no other, for here is his horse, and—Look here!"

He sprang forward as he spoke, for an object had caught his eye.

It was a ghastly object, too, for one hand severed from the body buried beneath was sticking out of the fresh earth, blood-stained and dirt-stained, yet upon the little finger was visible a red spot that had not come from the life veins.

"It is Mabrey, for that is his ruby ring," declared Mr. Preston, gently taking up the hand and holding it, as though not knowing what to do.

"Give me the ring, father."

Berkley Preston glanced quickly at his daughter, to read in her face the secret he had half suspected; but, though pale and sad, it showed no sign that she was looking down upon the grave of one who had become the idol of her heart.

"Father, Mr. Mabrey has several times begged me to accept that ring, or at least wear it, and I firmly refused; but now I will accept it, until I find one who can claim it as a right. Who could have killed him?"

"That is hard to say. Strange that Tiny Tim is not here! Ah! I have it!"

"Well, sir?" asked Arta, as Mr. Preston paused.

"Mabrey has doubtless been following our trail with Tiny Tim to look us up, and has been killed by Indians, and his pard has buried him."

Arta shook her head.

"This is not then your idea, my child?"

"No, father, for would not Tiny Tim have taken his ring and his horse?"

"True; who then can have done this deed?"

"Mr. Mabrey had many enemies on the border, I have heard."

"Well, one of them has killed him and buried him here, and for fear of being found out has left his horse; but see here, Arta!"

Mr. Preston pointed as he spoke to a track in the fresh earth.

"Ah! there is but one foot, not a woman's, could make that track, father."

"Yes, Tiny Tim's."

"True; and there is another—a larger boot-mark. What can it mean?"

"I know not; but I will take Mabrey's horse, and mayhap he may lead us back to the train."

"God grant it, for if he does not we are lost," added Arta, fervently.

Mr. Preston then went to the side of the noble bay, and an exclamation of delight broke from his lips, for a buckskin haversack of food hung to the saddle.

Quickly communicating the joyful news to Arta, she sprang from her saddle, and the father and daughter made a hearty meal, which greatly revived their spirits, for the gnawings of hunger were great, and went far toward depriving them of all heart and hope.

Having carefully covered the hand with earth, and thrown upon the grave logs, the remnants of former camp fires, and brush, to protect it from the wolves, they took the saddle from Arta's horse, for he was well-nigh fagged out, and transferred it to the back of Red Ranger, the splendid steed of Mert Mabrey.

"Now give him the rein and we will go where he leads," ordered Berkley Preston, as he raised his daughter to the saddle, and mounting his own horse and leading the other mustang they set off, Red Ranger taking a straight course to the north-west, as though he had an objective point in view.

Hardly had they ridden a mile when Ranger shied to one side, from an object that lay half-hidden in the long prairie grass.

Dismounting, Mr. Preston took it up, and with a look of intense surprise held it up to the view of Arta, while he asked:

"Do you know this?"

"Yes, father; it is the beadwork knapsack Tiny Tim had at the back of his saddle."

"Yes, and unknowingly he has dropped it, for see, the straps are broken. I will see what it contains."

The contents soon were revealed—first, a fancy blue woolen shirt, a new suit of clothes never yet worn, and which consisted of a pair of gray corduroy pants and black velvet sack-coat—a belt of arms, seemingly new—some ammunition—a pair of handsome cavalry boots, small enough for a woman—a black slouch hat with broad brim, and some other little articles, with a locket containing two pictures.

One of these was a miniature likeness of Mert Mabrey, evidently taken years before, and ere his face had become stamped with traces of evil deeds done; the other was the picture of a young and beautiful girl that seemed to Arta, as she gazed upon it, to be most familiar to her in every feature; but where she had seen the original she could not recall.

"Arta!"

The maiden started at the sudden address of her father, for his manner indicated that he had made some discovery, or had arrived at some important decision.

"Well, father?"

"You have fretted frequently at not being a man on this trip, and complained that your skirts have been a worry to you. Here is a suit, boots and all, that will just fit you, and to-night when we camp, I suggest that you metamorphose yourself into a man."

"Oh, father!"

"I am in earnest, my child."

"But what will they say in the train?"

"I am no prairie man, Arta, but I do know that this horse is not leading us to the train, but, on the contrary, in the direction of Kearney or Fort McPherson, and no one will know us there, and it will be better for you to appear as my son than as my daughter."

"I am willing to be governed by you, father; but, do you not think we will see the train again?"

"No; it will continue on up the Republican, in the direction of Denver, and we will strike the Platte, and thence find our way to Ramsey Preston's ranch, for this horse will find a settlement, and, as to the train, we have nothing there to regret losing, for our worldly goods are with us," and Mr. Preston smiled bitterly.

"But these are not my clothes!"

"If Tiny Tim is not content to accept pay for them, we can bring him to terms, for the more I think it over, the more I believe him to be in some way connected with Mabrey's death."

"I will do as you wish, father."

"Then we will camp for the night in yonder timber, where we will find water, and you can metamorphose yourself into a youth, my son," and with a light laugh Berkley Preston sprang into his saddle and they rode on once more.

Reaching the timber, while her father watered the horses at the little stream, and lariatd them out to feed upon the juicy grass, Arta transformed herself from a beautiful girl into a handsome youth of apparently seventeen, and, with her hair coiled up snugly under her hat, looked indeed the boy to the life.

After another meal from the haversack of poor Mabrey, they were making preparations for a night's rest, for the sun had already set, and night was coming on, when they were startled by the sudden and wild neighing of a horse, and the rapid beat of approaching hoofs followed.

Mr. Preston sprung for his rifle, and Arta laid her hand upon the butt of one of the revolvers she wore, for she had buckled around her slender waist the belt of arms she had found in Tiny Tim's knapsack.

Thus they waited—the maiden in her masculine attire, even to Tiny Tim's cavalry boots, which fitted her well, making a pretty picture as she stood, in fearless attitude, ready to greet either friend or foe.

A moment more and a horse dashed into sight, and what they saw drove every particle of blood from the face of both father and daughter.

There, not sixty paces away, halted, and with head upreared, eyes staring, flanks heaving, and with a startled snort issuing from his nostrils, stood a steed that was snowy white.

And he was not riderless; yet better had it been were it so, for, upon his back, strapped at full length, was a human form, and the long trailing hair falling almost to the ground showed that it was indeed a woman, thus bound, Mazeppa-like, to the fiery animal.

In horror the father and daughter gazed upon the sickening sight, and then Arta cried:

"Come, father! there is work for us there."

She started forward as she spoke, but with a wild neigh of fright the white steed wheeled and bounded away, while from the lips of the one upon his back broke a shriek of anguish, so full of terror and misery, that Arta covered her ears with her hands to shut out the cry.

But, knowing that the woman yet lived, Arta Preston was not one to think of self were succor for the unfortunate possible, and calling to her father to follow, she ran toward Red Ranger.

Quickly the two horses were saddled, and springing into the Mexican saddle of Mert Mabrey, Arta bounded away, closely followed by her father.

Away over the prairie they sped, lighted by the rising moon, and, like the very wind Red Ranger went on in pursuit of the specter-like steed in his lead, and rapidly dropped the mustang ridden by Mr. Preston far behind.

Loudly he called to his daughter to draw rein, and in vain did she strive to obey, for the thoroughly excited Red Ranger held the bit in his teeth, and no power of her hand could check his speed.

Realizing this, Mr. Preston reeled, and almost fell from his saddle, as he felt that his daughter might be lost to him forever.

But a sharp yelp aroused him, and looking backward, from whence came the sound, he beheld a score of dark objects coming rapidly on in pursuit.

One glance, and the moonlight revealed that they were large prairie wolves, and Berkley Preston felt that the end must soon come, for they were hot upon his trail and gaining rapidly upon him, while another glance ahead showed him that Red Ranger was slowly overhauling the Mazeppa.

"Great God! must I be dragged down and torn to death, and my poor child be left alone in the world?" he groaned, in agony of spirit, as the savage brutes drew nearer and nearer at every bound, in spite of the noble efforts of the now terrified and steaming mustang.

CHAPTER IX.

TRUE TO THE TRAIL.

WHEN Berkley Preston realized that a short while more must end his agony, he almost lost consciousness; but, rallying, he determined to fight to the last for his life, for he was well armed, and he had heard that a bold man could keep at bay the largest pack of wolves.

But then he had also heard that when made mad with hunger they knew no fear, and this seemed to be the case with those now hotly pressing upon his trail, for they came on untiringly, gaining steadily, and with an occasional yelp as of joy at soon breaking their fast.

Nearer and nearer they drew, until the man could stand the agony of suspense no longer, and determined to draw rein and end the misery he endured.

Hard then he drew upon the bit, but the mustang, terrified at the fate awaiting him, could not be checked in his mad speed. Preston knew then, that it must be a running fight; so let go the rein and drew his revolvers.

Turning in his saddle to fire, for the patter of the brutes' feet could now be heard, he saw with surprise that the pack were swerving to the right, and no longer following directly behind his mustang!

What could it mean? Had they not been in pursuit of him, after all?

Anxiously and hopefully he watched, and saw them still pressing swiftly on, their heads stretched forward, and noses near the ground, like hounds when on a scent.

The mustang, himself, they seemed not to see or care for, and still rushing on, they soon passed him, some thirty feet to the right.

Raising his revolver he fired into the pack.

A sharp yelp of agony followed; then a sudden halt, and the pack turned upon their wounded comrade and tore him to pieces, for the smell of blood had maddened them.

Seeing his mistake, Berkley Preston urged his

mustang further away from them, yet still holding on his former course, for, far ahead over the moonlit prairie, was yet indistinctly visible the white steed of the Mazeppa, and the dark form of Red Ranger pursuing.

An instant only the pack of savage wolves tarried, and then circled around with sharp yelps, and once more bounded forward as before on some trail they had been steadily following.

Away they swept over the prairie, and, as their course was the one he followed, Berkley Preston urged his mustang on after them.

And thus the chase went on, the tired mustang still steadily dropping behind, while Arta was as steadily gaining upon the Mazeppa.

Realizing this, and having decided upon her course, the maiden untied the lasso at the horn of the saddle, and which Mert Mabrey had taught her to throw with considerable skill, determined to throw it over the head of the flying white steed.

She knew that, though she was powerless to check the onward flight of Red Ranger herself by sheer strength, that, at the throwing of the lariat the well-trained animal would come to a sudden halt, and, if she failed to lasso the white steed, she could spring to the ground and thus hold her own horse until her father came up.

As Ranger drew near enough the maiden took firm hold of the lariat, arranged the slip-noose, and whirling it around her head to get the proper momentum, cast it with all the skill and strength she could master.

But the white animal, glancing backward as he ran, saw the whirling rope, and sheered suddenly to the right, the movement bringing another cry of anguish from the bound form on his back, and the coil fell to the ground, while Red Ranger braced himself, and came to a sudden halt that threw the maiden from her saddle.

But, lighting on her feet, she quickly grasped the rein, and checked her horse just as he was about to bound away in pursuit once more.

Almost exhausted with exertion and excitement Arta unwillingly gave up the chase of the mysterious Mazeppa; so she drove the lariat firm into the ground with the barrel of her revolver, and thus having secured Red Ranger, turned to gaze after the white horse that was still pursuing his course as before, and at a speed that rather increased than abated.

Then she looked backward, and far off beheld her father coming slowly on.

And, as she looked, her eyes fell upon a dark mass moving over the short grass of the prairie and coming directly toward her.

What could it be?

A second glance, and a chill crept over her heart, for she knew they were wolves, and that she would be at their mercy, were she not able to mount Red Ranger once more and fly.

But the horse had discovered his danger too, and was tugging violently to free himself from the lariat, yet was held fast by the stake which Arta had driven deeply and firmly into the ground.

Running to his side she in vain endeavored to mount, for he plunged too violently; could she gain the saddle her knife would sever the lariat and the speed of the horse soon would bear her out of danger.

Afraid to approach him in his frightened and vicious mood, she turned to confront the fearful danger that menaced her, and saw the dark objects coming on with whine and yelp as the trail grew warmer.

But one look told her that she was at their mercy, for what could she do with that fierce pack of brutes? Even did she kill one or more, the others would spring upon her she only knew too well.

Tottering with weakness at the fearful death she confronted, she seemed to be losing consciousness from fright and horror, when the rapid clatter of hoofs aroused her, and turning, she beheld the Mazeppa steed almost upon her.

He was upon the back trail, and, as he dashed by, there came in piteous, plaintive tones, the cry:

"Save me! oh, save me!"

Arta was speechless, for what could she do?

A danger as fearful seemed to await her, too, and she gave herself up for lost, as the ravenous pack of wolves were now almost upon her.

But, away over the prairie bounded the white steed, going to the westward, for he turned obliquely off, when within a lasso's length of Arta, while right toward her, seemingly, came the savage brutes.

Nearer and nearer, and then, just as all hope was gone, and when her limbs, unable to uphold her weight, allowed her to sink upon the prairie, the wolves swerved to the left, and passed her like the wind, seemingly unconscious of her presence!

What did it—what could it mean?

That Red Ranger was also surprised she could see, for he stood like a statue, and, with an effort, she arose and approached him.

Quietly he stood gazing alternately at her, and then at the wolves, all the while trembling violently.

But, suddenly, he started, and bounded to the end of his lariat in the opposite direction, and with horror, Arta saw that the savage pack were coming back, and again she gave herself up for lost.

Nearer and nearer they came, now yelping wildly, and then, just as they reached the spot where the white steed had swerved from his course, they also went to the right oblique and followed on his trail!

"Great God! they are on the trail of the Mazeppa! They did not see me even, for, like bloodhounds, they follow only the trail their scent started them upon."

"Father in heaven I thank Thee that I am safe, but in Thy mercy spare yonder poor victim," cried the maiden, fervently, and she gazed with staring eyes after the white steed and the pack on his trail, until the coming of her father broke her painful reverie, and, wholly unnerved, she threw herself into his arms, as he sprung to her side with a cry of joy at her safety.

CHAPTER X.

TRAILING A MYSTERY.

A MAN was walking leisurely along the streets of Leavenworth, apparently willing to be amused by anything that might turn up of interest, when he halted to gaze into a shop window where various articles of merchandise were displayed to tempt the eye of the passer-by.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon an object that caused him to start, and immediately he entered the shop, and was promptly waited upon by the obsequious proprietor of the establishment.

"I would like to see that guitar displayed in your window," he said, quietly.

"Ah yes; a fine instrument, sir, and just such a one as I thought would catch the eye of a gallant troubadour," and the shopman handed over the instrument, which the stranger regarded closely, as he thought:

"It is the same, for here are the initials inlaid in pearl. May I ask where you got this instrument, sir?" he demanded.

"Oh yes; I bought it of a young girl, and a very pretty one, too."

"Do you know her name?"

"I think her father called her Arta."

"Ah! when was this?"

"A week or more ago."

"She was evidently poor to part with an instrument that she must have prized," suggested the stranger.

"She was poor, sir, and her father and herself stopped here on their way to a relative's in Nebraska, I believe."

"They had not enough money to buy horses to continue on their journey with a train going west, and I gave her a hundred and fifty dollars for this guitar, for I knew it would sell for more."

"And your price for it now is—"

"Say two hundred, sir, for I took a risk in buying it."

"Certainly! Here is your money. Now box the instrument securely and keep it until I send for it."

The shopman counted the money, handed over his card and asked:

"Your name, please?"

"Lucien De Leon. You say the lady and her father left with a west bound train a week ago?"

"Yes, sir, such they remarked was their intention, and I have not seen them since. The maiden was a fine performer on the guitar, and bought from me a cheap instrument to carry with her."

"Thank you. Good-day, sir," and Lucien De Leon left the shop, and wended his way to the encampment of the trains going west.

"When does the first train pull out westward?" he asked a teamster.

"In 'bout two weeks."

"Nothing sooner?"

"Nary, pard; you will hev ter wait; but this hain't no slow place to wait in, I'm thinkin'."

"It is too slow for me, so I shall not wait," and turning on his heel the young man walked briskly back to his hotel and went to his room.

Then his stylish suit of white corduroys and blue velvet jacket was quickly changed for buckskin leggings and hunting-shirt, and two hours before sunset Lucien De Leon, mounted on a large clay-bank, with silver mane and tail, and armed to the teeth, set out alone on the trail to the west.

At dark he encamped for the night in the shelter of some cottonwoods that fringed the banks of a small stream; but with the break of day he was again in the saddle, and his splendid horse, Flash, was throwing the miles behind him with the long, swinging pace he untiringly kept up.

Making three miles to the train's one, he came in sight of an encampment one evening, some two weeks after leaving Leavenworth, which he knew must be the one he sought.

Considerable surprise was manifested by all at seeing a single horseman, and a stranger, ride into camp, for it was a dangerous country for one to travel alone through.

Unheeding the curious eyes turned upon him, he asked the train boss:

"Is there a person with you by the name of Preston?"

"There was, sir, but I am sorry to say that both he and his daughter got lost from the train two days ago."

"Got lost?" asked Lucien De Leon, in surprise.

"Yes, sir; they rode off together, and not coming in at night, two of our party started in search of them, and they, too, have not been seen since."

"This is very strange; I have not seen any signs of Indians as I came along."

"Nor did we, or of the road-agents either, and some think that Preston and his daughter headed for the Platte, hoping to find it without a guide."

"Did they carry their effects with them?"

"They had little to carry, other than a carpet-bag of clothing, a box of provisions and an old guitar."

"Who were the two that went in search of them?"

"A young plainsman, Mert Mabrey, and his pard, Tiny Tim. I guess Mabrey and Tim were both gone on Preston's pretty girl, and I don't wonder at it, because she was a beauty, and we all loved her so much that we camped one whole day to hunt for 'em. You know them, then, sir?"

"Yes, and shall see if I cannot find them. I am obliged to you for your information."

"But you will camp with us all night, pard?"

"No, thank you; though I will get some provisions from you, and thank you to tell me exactly the spot where the Prestons left you, and the direction they took."

The provisions were generously supplied, and having obtained all the information he could glean, Lucien De Leon started back on the trail, and shortly after midnight halted at the encampment where Berkley Preston and Arta had left the train.

Here he went into camp for the balance of the night, and at sunrise continued on his way on the course which it was said the father and daughter had taken.

When night drew near he came in sight of a piece of timber, which he cautiously approached, for he well knew the dangerous country he was in, and expected at any time to run upon a band of Indians or a party of road-agents that infested the trails.

But, seeing nothing suspicious, he rode into the timber and suddenly drew rein, for before him a few steps was a pile of brush and logs, which he saw covered a new-made grave.

"Can that be her grave, I wonder?" he cried, quickly, and throwing himself from the saddle he hastily approached it.

"It has not been made forty-eight hours, and here are comparatively fresh tracks about it; ha! this is the track of a woman."

Quickly he threw aside the brush off the grave, the logs followed, and with his knife he made a shovel of bark and began to throw out the soft earth until the ghastly hand was revealed.

"This is a man's hand, thank God! but the grave is large enough to contain two bodies," and thus saying he again went to work, and just as the twilight shadows deepened, reached the dead form.

"No, there is but one body here, and it is a man. Now to refill the grave."

Again he set to work, and aided by the rising moon, soon had the grave as it was before he had disturbed it, and walked toward his horse, that had strayed off a short distance.

"Well, Flash, old fellow, we will camp here to-night," he said, in a kindly tone, and his hand was on the girth-strap to unloosen it, when his quick ear caught the sound of a hoof-fall.

Instantly he retreated to the shadow of a clump of trees, leading his horse with him, and there awaited.

Nearer and nearer sounded the hoof-strokes, and then came in sight a snow-white steed.

Nearer and nearer, holding his way at a gallop through the timber, and at a course that must bring him within a few feet of where Lucien De Leon stood.

"He is riderless, and my lasso shall soon tell me if he is of any use," muttered the horseman, as he leaped lightly into his saddle and quickly seized his lariat and made it ready for throwing.

Nearer and nearer drew the white horse until, with a loud, ringing neigh, he halted full in the moonlight.

"Good God!"

The exclamation broke from the lips of Lucien De Leon at what he beheld, for upon the back of the white steed was strapped a human form.

At the sound of his voice the white horse wheeled and bounded away like an arrow from the bow, while back to the ears of the horseman came the cry:

"Save me! for the love of God!"

The arm that held the lariat fell to his side, and Flash, alarmed, as though he had seen an object not of the earth, shrunk back into the bushes with a terrified snort.

But instantly the man recovered himself, the

lasso was hung upon the horn, the spurs were driven into the flanks, and away darted the splendid claybank in pursuit of the Mazeppa, while from the set lips of Lucien De Leon came the words:

"That was a woman's voice, and I will save her! Come, Flash, you must now prove my boast, that no horse can lead you."

CHAPTER XI.

THE OVERLAND REST.

At the time of which I write North Platte was a mere hamlet, with half a hundred houses, and the resort of many of the wildest spirits of the border.

With an army post near by, and being on the direct trails leading north-westward to Laramie and the Black Hills, south-westward along the South Platte to Denver, due west to Cheyenne and Utah, and besides the center of a great cattle country, yearly developing, it was a place of considerable importance in spite of its exceedingly meager population.

Of course the irrepressible border saloon and gambling-hell were features of the place, and these were the centers of attraction to the majority of the community, and the load-stone that drew all visitors, whether they wore the uniform of the army, the buckskin of the scout and trapper, the hunting-shirt of the miner seeking gold, or were teamsters, bullwhackers, herders or wealthy speculators or cattle-men.

Among the noted characters of the border hamlet at that time was Dave Perry, a man whose slender form concealed the strength of a giant, the courage of a lion, and the heart of one of nature's noblemen.

He had "hung out his shingle," so to speak, in the frontier village, as the keeper of the Overland Rest, and that he was master in his own house, he quickly proved to those who attempted to play too high a hand with him, and it was not long before even the most reckless spirits cared not to anger him, for a blow from Dave Perry sent the man it hit to earth, and if compelled to use a pistol he never failed in a shot, and was master of the knife in a close encounter.

Of course he had not escaped unharmed in the numerous affrays forced upon him, for he had been severely wounded half a score of times; but then, wounds did not seem to hurt Dave much, while a funeral had invariably followed for the man who left his mark upon him.

Possessing such qualities, which were rare virtues upon the border, and added to them a ready heart to help a friend, a generous nature that kept his hand in his pocket to aid one in distress, he soon won the admiration of the townspeople, and his Overland Rest became the popular resort of the place, and no stranger entered the village without going to visit him.

And it is to the Overland Rest that I would have my reader accompany me, one pleasant evening, some days after Berkley Preston and his daughter left the Denver bound train for a gallop that got them lost upon the prairie.

The Overland Rest was one of the most pretentious buildings in town, and was built of logs that had been hauled many a long mile over the plains, and roofed over with canvas.

It was some forty feet in length, twenty-five in breadth. At the rear end was a bar, behind which stood several picturesque dispensers of liquors, ready to serve the thirsty with gin, whisky and brandy; but those who had sampled the three liquors, had usually decided that they all came out of the same barrel, and were labeled differently from courtesy.

In front of the bar, after leaving space for a line of drinkers two deep, were tables, at which were groups of men playing dominoes, throwing dice, or indulging in poker or eucher, with more or less heavy stakes bet on all games.

And a rough-looking set most of the half-hundred men in the room were, for there could be seen the bullwhacker, the cowboy, border ruffian and desperado-in-general, with a sprinkling of scouts, trappers, shopkeepers of the town, soldiers, and rancheros.

With two or three exceptions all were gambling, and without exception all were drinking, if I except alone Dave Perry, who sat at a table apart, smoking a cigar, and idly watching, though of course with interest, the money flowing into his coffers.

He was somewhat flashily dressed, wore a heavy watch-chain and diamonds, and beneath his sack-coat, though not visible, those who knew him were aware of the fact that he wore a revolver on each hip for use, if need be.

A man with a resolute face, eagle eye, and a kindly smile, he was just the one to avoid in a deadly fracas, to seek for a friend, or ask a favor of, and his quiet demeanor held in check the most boisterous patrons of his saloon.

Presently into the room came two persons, and they hesitated at the doorway; but Dave Perry, seeing that they were strangers, beckoned to them to come to his table.

One advanced with a bold, easy step, while the other came forward in an embarrassed and hesitating manner, and drew his slouch hat further down over his eyes.

"Be seated, gentlemen. What will you drink?" accosted Dave, politely.

They obeyed the request, and the elder replied:

"Thank you, neither of us drink, but we came here in the hope of finding a ranchero who lives somewhere in this locality, I believe."

"If he's within a hundred miles I know him. What's his name, pard?"

"Ramsey Preston."

"Ah!"

"You know him, I see by your manner," said the stranger, hastily, while his companion gave vent to a slight exclamation of surprise.

"Yes, and he's a strange one, too, pard."

"How mean you, sir?"

"Well, he's had a ranch to the northward of the Platte for years, and yet he's never allowed man or beast food at his door, and has lived like a hermit."

"Indeed? This is very strange, for, as I knew him in the past, his was a most social nature," said the stranger.

"Then he has changed most unaccountably, for one night I asked for shelter, being up on the Birdwood hunting, and he refused it; but he's now changed his tactics again, pard, for two days ago he came into Platte, was as social as a homeless dog, spent his money free, invited me out to see him, and hired a number of cowboys to go down into Texas and drive up cattle for him, and he'll soon be the boss ranchero in this country, I'm thinking."

The two strangers had listened most attentively to the description of Ramsey Preston from the lips of Dave Perry, and the younger asked eagerly:

"Is he in town, now?"

"No, he's gone back upon his ranch," and then, as if for the first time noticing the extreme youth and refined appearance of the speaker, he continued:

"Little pard, you have come to a wild country to live, and I'm thinking you'd better have stayed at home."

"I have no home, sir," was the sad reply, and the elder stranger quickly remarked:

"My son and myself have come West to live, sir, I having been unfortunate in the East, and I am now seeking Ramsey Preston, as he is an old friend of mine."

"I hope he'll give you a good welcome. Did you come in with a train?"

"No, we left the train on the Republican, bound to Denver, while we headed north for this place."

"Well, any of the boys will guide you to the Birdwood when you wish to go; won't drink, you say?"

"No, thank you!"

"A good plan if you only stick to it."

"What is that he sez, Dave, that he won't licker up?" asked a huge, heavily-bearded fellow, approaching, and looking the younger of the two strangers in the face with that in his eye that meant mischief.

"He says he will not drink, Grizzly Gabe," replied Dave Perry, quietly.

"Won't drink, eh? Waal, I jist guess so, when I says treat, an' I says so now, fer I hes jist won a clean half thousand an' kin afford ter spread benzine all round. Come, pard, it's my call, an' I axes yer one an' all to dernominate yer pizen."

An almost general rising was the result of this invitation, and as Grizzly Gabe cast his eyes over the hesitating few, they also arose, rather to avoid trouble with the desperado than from fear, for he was known as a desperate character, always on the alert to find some cause of quarrel, and like an enraged hyena when aroused.

"Bartenders, set up ther liquid, an' that's ther pay, so g'n me ther change ef thar is any," and he threw a twenty-dollar gold piece upon the bar, upon which glasses and bottles were quickly set for the invited guests.

"Dave Perry, my invitashun included you and yer friends," and the bully turned toward the one he addressed.

"Thank you, Grizzly Gabe, but you know I never drink in business hours."

"Bizzness be durned! You'll drink now, Dave, when an old friend axes yer."

"I will do no such thing; and besides, you are no friend of mine, Grizzly Gabe," came the cool reply.

The desperado knew Dave Perry well, and he cared not to anger him, so was willing to let his not drinking pass, but not so with the two strangers, who had risen, as if to leave the saloon, but had been prevented by the dense crowd around them.

"Waal, Dave, yer know yer own business best, an' ef it's yer rule, I'll not ax yer ter break it; but them two tenderfeet must j'ine me, or I'll know why," and the desperado turned his burning eyes upon the strangers, and all saw that he was determined upon a row.

"Thank you, sir, but neither my son nor myself care to drink," replied the elderly stranger, calmly.

"Care ter drink? What ther devil does I care whether yer cares ter or not; I says drink, and ye hes ter drink," yelled the bully, lashing himself into a fury.

"Drink with him, sir, you and your son,"

whispered an officer, standing near; and, with a look at his son, now as pale as death, the stranger was about to obey, when Dave Perry, having heard the soldier's remark, said:

"No, for if you do he will at once pick another cause of quarrel, for the Grizzly's full of fight to-night."

"I will be governed by you, sir," replied the stranger, seemingly impressed with the resolute and kindly face of the saloon-keeper.

"Did yer heur me? What does you an' thet gal-lookin' boy o' yours drink?" yelled the Grizzly.

"I decline to drink with you, sir, and so does my son," was the firm reply of the stranger.

"Yer does, eh? Then I crams ther lickin' down yer throats, durned ef I doesn't," shouted Grizzly Gabe, and seizing a bottle he sprang toward the strangers, with every intent in his face to do as he threatened.

"Hold on, Grizzly Gabe!"

It was Dave Perry that spoke, and he stepped in front of the strangers, and confronted the desperado.

"Dave, I doesn't want no trouble with you, an' I fergives you fer not tacklin' benzine, fer yer knows yer own biz best; but these gents hes got ter s-taller lickin' at my call."

"I say not if they do not wish to."

"Yer interferences, does yer?"

"I do, for they are strangers in my saloon, and therefore claim my protection," was the firm reply.

"They will hev ter git more pertection, fer I hes with me heur over a dozen pards as will foller my lead, as you knows, Dave Perry," was the savage threat, and, as the desperado cast his eyes over the crowd, a number of forms began to move toward him, while others at once fell back upon either side, two or three making over to Dave Perry as if to support him.

This left Grizzly Gabe standing at the bar, with a dozen as hard-looking characters as himself supporting him, for he was their acknowledged leader in all acts of devilry, and Dave Perry, the two strangers, the officer before spoken of and several cowboys facing them, while the majority in the room had ranged themselves along the walls to see the result.

"Dave, yer see I hes yer," began the bully.

"I see no such thing, Grizzly Gabe; I want no quarrel with you, but you shall not come into my place and force my friends to drink with you against their will," said Dave, firmly yet quietly.

"I seeks no quarrel with you nuther, Dave; but I axed them gents ter drink, an' they refuses, and I intends ter fill their hides full o' benzine."

"I warn you not to make the attempt, Grizzly."

"What will yer do about it, Dave?" was the sneering question.

"I will kill you, so help me God!"

Those who knew Dave Perry knew that he would keep his word, and all drew a long breath to see what the result would be, while a few of the more timid nearer the door hastily slipped out of what they soon expected would become worse than Dante's *Inferno*.

Although Dave Perry, a much smaller man than the bully, stood calm and smiling, his hands hanging seemingly listlessly by his side, all knew that he was a lightning drawer of a revolver and a dead shot, while he feared nothing, though he knew he would become a target for the bullets of Grizzly Gabe's friends did he kill him.

The two strangers stood side by side, one with bowed head and trembling form, the other pallid as a corpse, yet calm and apparently fearless, his great dread seeming to be for his son.

The other backers of Dave Perry stood with their hands already upon their weapons, and were cool and firm, while the desperado and his pards seemed to feel that they held the winning hand, though they had forgotten that several barkeepers behind them might join in the fracas with considerable detriment to them.

Which way the men ranged along the walls would side was hard to tell, for those who might wish to aid Dave Perry were covered by the desperado, who so long had held full sway on the border, while others, if it came to a fight, only wished to get out and save their own precious lives.

Thus the tableau lasted for an instant, all eyes resting upon the tall form and evil face of Grizzly Gabe to see whether he would attempt to carry out his reckless threat and force liquor down the throats of the two strangers.

And, just as the desperado moved for some purpose, into the saloon stalked a tall form, and walking straight up to the bar called for a drink, seemingly unmindful of the terrible scene he had broken in upon.

"Pard, yer hes chipped in here whar an' when yer is not wanted, so jist stan' aside while I talks."

The speaker was Grizzly Gabe, and as the new-comer turned the light fell full upon his face, and a startled cry broke from the lips of the youth, who clung convulsively to his father's arm.

"Did you address me?" demanded the stranger, in deep, earnest tones.

"I did, an' as yer doesn't seem ter understand chin music, I'll jist h'ist yer one side."

As Grizzly Gabe spoke he laid his huge hand heavily upon the shoulder of the stranger; but ere his gripe closed he received a stunning blow in the face, and was suddenly seized in an iron gripe and hurled to the floor with a force that made the building tremble and the glasses on the bar to ring as merrily as bells.

And then, ere any one present could comprehend the situation, the stranger sprang upon the body of the prostrate desperado, with one foot upon his breast the other on his head, and his leveled revolvers seemed to cover the heart of each one of the desperate band that had rallied to the support of the now discomfited Grizzly Gabe.

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW SETTLER.

"PARDS, your chief is down, and it would be no more than a healthy proceeding on your part to levante."

Thespeaker was the new-comer, who so rudely had turned the tables upon Grizzly Gabe the desperado, and who still coolly maintained his position upon the body and head of that worthy, while he kept his revolvers leveled at the backers of the bully in a manner that held them cowed.

"Who ther devil are yer, thet holds such a flush hand heur?" asked one of the band.

"A new settler—one of the unsalted generation, if so you will, and I advise you to get out of this," was the cool reply.

"And our pard, Grizzly thar, whom you is standin' on?"

"Can go too," and the stranger sprang backward and allowed the bully to rise.

As he staggered to his feet his face was black with passion, and his eyes glittered with hate; but there was something in the look of his victor that curbed an outburst of rage, and he suddenly turned toward the door, his backers slowly following, for a glance was sufficient to show them that with the fall of their leader, the whole room was against them.

But, they were men who bided their time, and the remark of Grizzly Gabe as he turned at the door, but expressed the feelings of all:

"Pard stranger, yer holds trumps in this leetle game, an' I dasn't play ag'in' yer; but I guesses we'll meet ag'in afore long, an' maybe I'll hold a winnin' keerd."

"For fear I may not know you when we meet I'll put my mark on you," was the retort of the stranger, and, as quick as the lightning's flash his hand was thrust forward, a flash and report came together, and Grizzly Gabe was seen to throw his hand up to his head, while one of his comrades quickly shut the door.

"Oh, sir, you have killed him," cried the youth.

"No, only clipped one of his large ears," was the assuring and calm reply, and turning to Dave Perry, he continued:

"You must pardon me for chipping in and taking the fight off your hands; but I overheard from without what was going on, and thought I could save trouble."

"Well, you did, pard, so put it there, and take Dave Perry's thanks, and his word for it that you've got the ironest grip and lightniest hand I ever saw," and the keeper of the Overland Rest grasped the hand of the stranger, who said pleasantly:

"My hand is not a feather-weight, I admit; but come, let us have that long-delayed drink. Come, gentlemen, all are included, but I force no one to drink," and the light merry laugh of the new-comer was contagious, for many joined in at the expense of Grizzly Gabe, and the bar was at once confronted by nearly two score of thirsty souls.

"Heur's Grizzly's gold twenty, Dave; will you give it to him, fer nobody got ther drinks on his treat," said one of the bartenders, handing the gold over the bar.

"Let me see it," and the stranger took it, threw it quickly into the air, and when it was coming down just in front of a lamp, drew his revolver and fired.

There was a twang as the leaden bullet struck the gold, and walking to the other end of the room, amid the bravos of all, the stranger picked up the money and threw it upon the bar, saying quietly:

"Now give it to the Grizzly and tell him I have marked it, too."

There was a round hole in one edge of it, where the bullet had struck, and the piece was passed around for inspection, while Dave Perry remarked:

"You lay over the deck, pard, on the shoot; but what may a friend call you?"

"Lucien De Leon is my name, and I have come here to settle."

"Going to turn ranchero, scout, or sell liquor, pard?"

"I am a ranchero from Texas, and have a herd already here, or on the way up, and my lay-out is on the Dismal."

"I have heard of you, for your cowboys passed through here two weeks ago."

"Pard, you are welcome, and I've a spare room for you in the Overland Rest, if you are not already located."

"No, and I'll accept your offer; my kind regards, gentlemen."

As Lucien De Leon spoke he raised the glass to his lips, and all dashed off their liquor with a relish and a welcome to the new ranchero.

"Now, Mr. Perry, I am anxious to find some trace of two persons who left a train bound to Denver, some days since, when it was on the Republican, and were supposed to have come in this direction," and Lucien De Leon sat down to Dave Perry's table and spoke in a low tone to him.

"Who were they?"

"A gentleman and his daughter, and, wholly unused to the prairie, I have dreaded evil to them."

"There's a gent and his son here, and they rave just come in; they are the ones that were innocently the cause of the row to-night."

"And where are they?"

"They left just as you asked all hands to drink."

"Ah yes, I noticed the boy; a handsome youth he was, too, and he seemed timid—Ha."

"What is it, pard?"

"Nothing; only a thought passed through my mind," and it was evident that Lucien De Leon did not care to give expression to the sudden thought that had flashed upon him, for he continued:

"Do you know where the father and his son are stopping?"

"No, but I guess over at the Platte House; but come, take a drink with me, and we'll go over and look 'em up, for I've got an idea that they are the ones you want."

"But they were a gentleman and his daughter."

"Well, I think that boy is a girl."

"Ah!"

"True, for he was too pretty for a boy, and looked as if he had never seen a crowd before. What the devil's up now?"

This last remark was caused by a loud commotion outside the door, and the next moment in dashed a crowd of excited men, and in their midst were two prisoners they were dragging along.

One glance at the prisoners, and both Lucien De Leon and Dave Perry saw that they were the father and son of whom they had just been speaking.

CHAPTER XIII.

ACCUSED AND ACCUSER.

WHEN Lucien De Leon and Dave Perry saw who it was that the mob dragged in as prisoners, they stepped quickly forward, and the latter, urging the ranchero to keep quiet, asked quietly:

"Well, pards, what have you there?"

"A brace o' horse-thieves and murderers, pard, we has fetched before you, bein' ther justice, ter gi'n ther word to string 'em up," answered a man who had an arm on the shoulder of each prisoner.

Dave Perry glanced into the face of the youth and saw that it was white and quivering, and he was the more convinced that his conjecture was right, and said quietly:

"Well, if they are what you say, Ben Fanshaw, their necks will have to stretch, but they don't look like what you accuse them of being, and they shall have a fair trial."

"Their looks hain't ther thing, pard; I has seen a hyena in a Gospel shirt, a woman o' sin in a velvet gown, an' ther pard thar by yer side, who is smilin' as sweet as bee-honey out o' a hive, proved hisself, when he tackled Grizzly awhile ago, hell-ter-split o' ther pararer; so looks is mighty deceitful," and Gospel Luke, an itinerant preacher, miner, teamster, mustanger and jack-of-all-callings at large, when he was sober, and devil in general when he was drunk, stepped forward in the character of prosecuting attorney.

"Well, Gospel Luke, I'll take their faces for their innocence, until they are proven guilty; of what are they accused?" and Dave Perry, as the justice of the village, took his seat at his table and motioned to Ben Fanshaw, the constable, to place the prisoners before him, for in those days no postponements of trials were in order.

The father, pale and yet perfectly calm, and the son, trembling and white-faced, took the seats assigned them, and the crowd pressed closely around, Lucien De Leon leaning against the side of the cabin, near Dave Perry, his arms folded upon his broad breast, and his eyes coolly surveying the faces in his front.

"Of what are they accused?" repeated Dave Perry, rapping on the table with a whisky bottle to call the court to order.

"Murdering, robbing, and horse-stealing," said Ben Fanshaw, the constable, in a loud voice.

"And who is their accuser?"

There was a momentary silence, and then a stir in the back of the crowd, and Grizzly Gabe, with a scarred, swollen face, stepped forward.

"You are back again, are you, Gabe?" quietly said Dave Perry.

"I are; is thar a law ag'in' it?"

"No; you are free, white and twenty-one, and I guess can go where you please; are you the accuser of these two prisoners?"

"I are?"

"Did you ever see them before you met them here to-night?"

"Is yer tryin' me or ther tenderfeet?"

"Answer my question."

"Waal, I never did."

"Of what do you accuse them?"

"They sloped from a train bound ter Denver, by the way o' ther Republican, kilt a young feller, robbed him, an' stole his horse an' come on heur."

"It is an infamous lie," cried the elder of the two prisoners, unable to control himself.

"Yer'll eat them words, pard, an' they won't agree with yer digestion," savagely said Grizzly Gabe, while Dave Perry remarked in the same quiet way:

"Where is your proof of this, Gabe?"

"They isn't with ther train, is they?"

"No."

"They is heur, hain't they?"

"Yes."

"Thar's a grave in ther cottonwood timber whar Buffalo Bill stood off old Tall Bull and his warriors fer two days."

"There are many graves there, Grizzly Gabe, for Buffalo Bill killed half a score there, and many a poor emigrant lies in those cottonwoods."

"But this are a *fresh* grave, Dave."

"Not as fresh as you are at times, Gabe."

"Waal, I won't spoil, Dave Perry."

"Not after the salting you got to-night."

A general laugh followed this center-shot of the justice, and made Grizzly Gabe scowl fiercely and remark:

"Durned ef I hain't been tried instead o' ther prisoners."

"That are so," said several of his satellites in chorus, while Dave continued:

"Well, who is in that fresh grave in the cottonwoods, Gabe?"

"Ther young feller as they kilt."

"What other proof have you against them?"

"They has his horse and ring."

"Ah! now who put you up to making this accusation against two men you have never seen before to-night?"

"That are not your business, justice."

"You will find that it is, for I shall dismiss the case unless I have proof against them."

The desperado looked ill at ease, and glanced somewhat anxiously over the crowd, but remained silent, and Dave Perry was about to end the farcical trial when there was a stir in the rear of the room, and a slender form suddenly confronted the judge and the prisoners.

"Tiny Tim!"

The name broke from the lips of father and son involuntarily; but unheeding the recognition, Tiny Tim said boldly:

"I make the accusation of murder and robbery against these prisoners."

"You?"

"Yes."

"You are a stranger here, I believe?" and Dave Perry scanned the handsome, dark, yet sinister face of the man, and then glanced at his slender, graceful form.

"To you I am a stranger, but this man knows me," and he turned to Grizzly Gabe.

"You are not to be congratulated upon your acquaintance, young man; but your name, please?"

"Tiny Tim."

"Ah! you are dodging under a border name, are you? Well, sir, where do you live?"

"From the Rockies to the Missouri," was the cool reply.

"Not healthy for you east of the Missouri, I guess."

"That is none of your affair, I am here to charge those two prisoners, Berkley Preston and his son, with having deserted the Denver bound train, inveigled my friend and prairie pard, Mert Mabrey, to follow them, and then of killing him, robbing him, and taking his horse and coming on here."

"This is a bold charge, Mr. Tiny Tim."

"It is a true one, as I can prove," was the bold reply.

"What proof have you?"

"I left the train in search of them, trailed them to the cottonwood timber, which Grizzly Gabe spoke of, and found there the new-made grave of my pard."

"Then I followed the trail on here, and at the Platte House to-night I found Mert Mabrey's horse, saddle and bridle, and, unseen by these prisoners, I saw them, and that boy wears on his finger a ring he took from my pard's hand, and on his back are clothes he stole from me, while in his pocket is a locket with Mert's picture and his wife's."

"If you doubt me, you'll find my dead pard's horse in the stable, and that ring on the boy's finger has got Mabrey's name on it, and a search will discover the locket on him."

This accusation, and apparent proof, seemed to astound even Dave Perry, as the manner

and words of Tiny Tim carried truth with them all thought.

As to the prisoners, they gazed at each other in dumb surprise, and neither could utter a word, so great was their amazement, at the coil of circumstantial evidence infolding them in its network.

With a look on his face that no one present could fathom, Tiny Tim stood in silence, seemingly triumphing in having brought the slayers of his friend, as he charged, to the end of their rope, for it was evident that the crowd were convinced of the guilt of the prisoners, and to be so convinced meant instant and terrible punishment in that wild community.

As for Dave Perry, he knew that he would be powerless to stem the current setting against him, and yet the very appearance of the prisoners stamped the accusation as false, and he was convinced that one was not a boy but a girl.

Yet the accuser, Tiny Tim, showed no sign of having discovered the secret, and made the charge against the youth, as though he had no doubt regarding the sex of the accused.

"Let me see that ring you wear," said Dave Perry, quietly, addressing the youth.

Turning to his father he received a nod to obey, and the ring was handed to the justice.

In it he saw the name of Mabrey, and a troubled look crossed his face, while he beckoned to Lucien De Leon to approach.

In an indolent way the young ranchero did as requested, and leaned over the table.

"The name is in the ring, as this little devil said," whispered Dave.

"Well?"

"That seems to clinch the matter of their guilt."

"Well?"

"They don't look like it."

"No."

"You think, with me, that one is a woman?"

"Yes."

"It won't do to hang a woman."

"You think they will hang them?"

"Sure."

"We must prevent it."

"Can't do it, pard."

"We can."

"I say no, for this town is hell broke loose when it gets to going, and that little fellow and Grizzly will carry the deck."

"We must not allow it," was the firm response of Lucien De Leon.

"There will be lots of human target-shooting done; but we may compromise by saying that she is a girl, and let them hang t'other one."

"No, that won't do."

"We can't make a fight of it, for though the constable would back me, and perhaps a few other friends, it would do no good, where all believe them guilty; but I'll save the girl."

"I'll save both."

"Don't be foolish, pard, for you are too fine a fellow to go under in a row."

"I'll not go under; hark! what are they saying?"

There was no use to ask the question, for the low murmur in the room now broke out into cries of denunciation, and a score of voices shouted:

"Hang 'em!"

And with this cry, Grizzly Gabe, now feeling that he had stout backers, moved forward, but was confronted by Ben Fanshaw, the constable, who said, quietly:

"Hold on, Gabe, ther court hasn't been heerd yet."

"What hev ther court ter say, now that they is found guilty?" was the sullen reply.

"Yes, ther court's duties are over, and now is my time ter prepare their souls fer glory; repent, ye sinful pilgrims, travelin' through this land o' sin, fer ther time o' thy death is at hand," cried Gospel Luke, in his stentorian tones, and he forced his way to the side of the prisoners, and a general movement was made toward them, while Grizzly Gabe laid his hand upon the shoulder of the eldest.

"Hold on, men, this case is not decided yet."

All started at the clear, ringing voice, and all eyes were turned upon Lucien De Leon, as he suddenly placed himself before the prisoners, and hurled Grizzly Gabe, Gospel Luke, and several others aside as though they were children.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RANCHERO AT BAY.

As the crowd fell back before the force of the ranchero's iron arm, Tiny Tim suddenly felt himself drawn forward with a motion that was irresistible, and glancing up at the face bending over him, from his lips broke a cry, seemingly of pain and terror combined.

It was the face of Lucien De Leon that looked down upon his own pallid countenance, and it was evident that he had seen that handsome face, and tall, sinewy form before.

Upon each shoulder of Tiny Tim rested a hand of Lucien De Leon, seemingly lightly, yet with a gripe that caused him to wince, while the ranchero said, calmly:

"Little pard, you have made an accusation

here that will hang these two prisoners, as you know, and I beg you to take a good look into their faces and say if you are not mistaken in the parties."

In breathless silence all awaited and watched, for the act of the ranchero had amazed the crowd beyond expression, and checked their advance toward the prisoners, while even Grizzly Gabe and Gospel Luke stood sullen and silent, not caring to face Lucien De Leon single-handed.

"I am not mistaken," said Tiny Tim; but his voice had lost its bold ring, and his dark-blue eyes never met the gaze of the ranchero.

"As I know the parties to whom you refer, I say that you are, although I admit there is a startling resemblance; look again, sir, and look carefully."

There seemed to be a menace in the tone and look, which the one to whom the words were addressed appeared to understand better than any one else, for he turned very pale, his lips quivered, and the emotions he felt he was determined to hide from all, yet it did not escape the quick eyes of Dave Perry and the two prisoners.

"Ef he is sartin the prisoners is ther tenderfeet he are lookin' fer, what's ther use o' starin' at them?" put in Grizzly Gabe.

"I addressed this person, not you, sir, and I warn you I will stand no interference in my effort to save these prisoners from suffering through a case of mistaken identity, and the right-minded here will sustain me in it," said Lucien De Leon, in his deep, stern tones, and a number of voices cried out:

"You are right, pard."

"Now, sir, look these two prisoners in the face," and the ranchero again fixed his piercing eyes upon Tiny Tim, who said, in a suppressed tone:

"I see them."

"Your ring, please," and the ranchero held forth his hand, and unhesitatingly the youth placed the ring in it.

"Is this the ring, sir, that your pard wore?"

"It looks like it, but I may be mistaken," was the sullen reply.

"Ah! now see if these prisoners may not be other than you supposed them."

Tiny Tim hesitated, seemed nervous, and in vain tried to escape the fascination of the gaze of the ranchero; but after a while he shrugged his shoulders, as though having made up his mind to his course, and said with an air of assumed indifference:

"Now I look at them, I believe I am mistaken, and I regret my error; but they are very like the ones I believed them."

"Good-night, gentlemen."

Without a word more he turned away and a strange smile crossed the face of the ranchero, while Dave Perry said in a loud tone:

"Gents, there is no charge now against you and you are free, and the court's adjourned."

A shout answered his words, for already had the fickle crowd undergone a revolution of feeling, and many pressed forward to congratulate the two, who had so narrowly escaped a summary execution.

"Come, you go with me and we'll have a bite of supper," and Dave Perry turned to the two prisoners, and then asked, as he looked around:

"Where's that boss ranchero?"

"He followed the little dandy feller out, and ther Grizzly follered him," said a cowboy.

"Then there will be music— Ha! they are at it," and Dave Perry bounded toward the door as several pistol-shots were heard without, mingling with shouts and curses.

As Dave Perry had anticipated, Grizzly Gabe had been at the bottom of the trouble, though he was not a participator in the affray.

Seeing Lucien De Leon come out of the Overland Rest and follow Tiny Tim up the street, he said to several of his comrades:

"Ef thar is any pard o' mine wants a hundred o' my circulatin' tin, he kin hev it by makin' cold meat o' thet gent," and he motioned toward the ranchero, who had just then overtaken Tiny Tim, and instantly one of the most evil of the lot of cut-throats determined to win the money, and boldly started after Lucien De Leon, at the same time calling on several of the gang:

"Come and see the slaughter well did."

In the mean time the ranchero had overtaken Tiny Tim, who wheeled about as he came up and said:

"Well, why have you dogged my steps?"

"Not that I find pleasure in your company, I assure you, but to warn you that if harm befall Berkley Preston and—"

"Why do you hesitate? You mean and his daughter?" sneered Tiny Tim.

"Yes, if harm befall Berkley Preston and his daughter you shall rue it, and, knowing me, you are aware that my threats are not idle."

"Oh! I am aware of that, my brave and handsome Lucien, my man of the iron arm and lightning eye."

"Then beware."

"I shall; but why do you not ask me what I am doing here?"

"I do not care."

"And are you not glad that your old foe, Merton Mabrey is dead?" sneered Tiny Tim.

"I do not believe he is dead."

"You heard what I said?"

"Yes," and without another word Lucien De Leon wheeled on his heel to return to the Overland Rest.

And that act saved his life, for Devil Dan, the volunteer assassin of Grizzly Gabe's band, had the drop on him, and was about to pull trigger.

But the sudden motion caused him to start and lose his aim, and though the bullet sped close to the head of Lucien De Leon it was a clear miss, and it was Devil Dan's last shot, for he fell dead in his tracks ere he could fire again, and the young ranchero turned to face the other two of the band, who were running to the aid of their comrade, or to win the hundred dollars, it is not known which.

Firing as they came on, it seemed as if the ranchero must fall; but he was no man to remain idle in danger, and throwing forward his revolver it cracked twice again, and down went the two desperadoes, just as Dave Perry and several others reached the scene.

"He is a murderer, for he killed those men in cold blood."

The speaker was Tiny Tim, and he pointed at the ranchero, upon whom a dozen men rushed to seize him.

CHAPTER XV. THE TEXAS COWBOYS.

"BACK!"

The one word ringing threateningly from the lips of Lucien De Leon checked the rush toward him, for his hands were thrust forward and each held a revolver, while the three prostrate forms on the ground, showed that his skill as a marksman was most deadly.

Still a score of weapons covered his heart, and had he fired, as many bullets would have riddled his body.

The moon shone in an unclouded sky, and the picture was a thrilling one, there in the street, with the one man holding at bay a number, and Tiny Tim, with folded arms and sinister face, standing near, gazing upon the ranchero with a look of triumph.

"Who killed these men?" asked Dave Perry, approaching, and followed by the constable, Ben Fanshaw.

"I did," was the cool reply of the ranchero.

"He are spoutin' truth, pard Dave; he made stiffs o' my poor friends thar, who wouldn't harm a coyote; jist shot 'em down same as ef they was wolves an' all for nothin'," whined Grizzly Gabe.

"You lie; that fellow," motioning with the toe of his cavalry boot to the body of Devil Dan, yet not moving his revolvers that covered the crowd; "that fellow fired on me and I turned and killed him; those other two rushed to his aid, and an undertaker draws the prizes," was the calm reply.

"Who says these men were murdered then?"

"I do," and Tiny Tim stepped forward.

"You are liable to mistakes, young man," remarked Dave.

"If I made one mistake, it is no reason I should make another; this man followed me for some purpose, overtook me, and was intending to take my life, when that brave man and his friends came to my rescue, and were shot down by this ranchero," was the unblushing reply of Tiny Tim.

"Ef he did that he must hang, jedgo," cried a voice in the crowd.

"Yas, we must string him up, fer we can't 'low no lawlessness in Platte," said Grizzly Gabe.

"Murderin' must be put down in this quiet community," remarked another.

"I agree with you, men, that lawlessness must be put down, and this gentleman shall have a fair and square trial, and if guilty will have to suffer," said Dave Perry, in a firm voice.

"Trial be durned; thar is ther stiffs, thar is ther barrels o' his revolver empty, this young feller says he did ther killin', ther witnesses is heur, the case hes gone ag'in' him, here are ther lariat fer a rope, an' yonder telegraph pole will do fer a gallus, seein' as trees hain't growed in this kentry," and Grizzly Gabe's speech seemed to meet with almost universal approval, for the crowd wished to witness a tragedy.

"Constable Fanshaw, take charge of the prisoner and put him in jail," said Dave Perry, who considered this the best means to protect the ranchero, as he saw that most of the crowd were followers of Grizzly Gabe, who was determined to hang the daring man whom they were afraid to meet in open fight.

Ben Fanshaw immediately attempted to obey orders; but the crowd hastily pressed forward, and with only Dave Perry and the ranchero to aid him, it looked as if the jail would never be reached with the prisoner.

"Men, do you go against me?" cried Dave, his manner calm, but eyes flashing, and the lion in his nature getting roused.

"We does fer a fact, pard Dave; you may be jedgo, but you hain't justice, an' we knows ef thet feller gits inter jail thar'll be no trial," cried Grizzly Gabe, now confident of his power to carry a winning hand.

Dave Perry glanced calmly over the crowd,

and saw that he had nearly thirty desperate men to deal with.

That the ranchero would render a good account of some of them, he knew, and also that he and the constable could drop a few he was confident, yet that the end would soon come, and against him, he was well aware.

But he was no man to shrink from duty, and confident that the ranchero had killed Devil Dan and the others in self-defense, he would not permit him to be dragged by a boy to cruel death, be the consequences what they might, and he determined to so make known and let the climax come.

"Pards, you know me, and I tell you that this prisoner is in my hands, and I tell you to stand aside and let me pass to jail with him," and for the first time Dave Perry drew his revolvers, and that one act proved he meant business, and Ben Fanshaw, a blind follower of duty, stepped to the other side of the ranchero, his weapons ready for use.

"Nary, Dave, for we says no; we likes you, and don't mean you no harm, but thet gamecock hev crowed his last crow."

"My friend, I thank you, and beg that, as this matter must be settled, you will stand aside and let me meet these gentlemen," and the ranchero addressed Dave Perry, while he stepped quickly to one side, as if to at once bring on the fight.

"No, pard, Dave Perry has given you his protection, and this gang of coyotes have got to fight if they want you," was the bold reply.

That they intended to fight was evident, for both Tiny Tim and Grizzly Gabe were urging them on, and that a moment more would have brought on a deadly fracas was certain; but just then, around the corner of a row of cattle sheds dashed a dozen horsemen, and quickly drew rein at sight of the scene before them.

At a glance Lucien De Leon seemed to recognize them, for he shouted, in trumpet tones:

"Ho! Texans to the rescue!"

A cheer answered, and a voice cried:

"It is the voice of Iron Arm, the Ranchero. Forward, Texans!"

A plunge of the mustangs forward, a halt, and a line of horsemen were drawn up behind the ranchero and his two supporters, while a dozen revolvers were drawn for use.

"Well, our captain, are you in trouble?" asked a pleasant, but resolute voice.

"A little misunderstanding, Fielding; I killed a trio of coyotes that bit at me, and the pack wish to worry me, and your arrival is most opportune," was the cool reply of the ranchero.

"We heard from a cowboy that a man answering your description came into the Platte this evening, and we left the herd on the prairie and came to welcome you; but, shall we ride these coyotes down, for we can do it?"

"No, Fielding, for I wish no trouble that can be avoided; but, come up to the Overland Rest, the saloon of my gallant friend here, and we'll moisten our throats; but mind you, boys, no disturbance," and, as indifferently as though the savage crowd, a moment before so confident in their power, did not confront him, Lucien De Leon stepped forward.

Suddenly they had stood, cursing this interruption, yet not daring to meet that little band of horsemen, although they outnumbered them, and cowed by the bearing of the ranchero, they gave him room to pass, Dave Perry and Ben Fanshaw closely following him, and behind them rode the Texans, Grizzly Gabe and his followers slowly falling to either side, but muttering dire threats of revenge for the death of their comrades.

CHAPTER XVI.

TINY TIM'S PLOT.

As Grizzly Gabe and his followers fell back before the Texans, who followed their leader to the Overland Rest, Tiny Tim motioned to the huge desperado that he wished to speak to him.

"Saunter up ther street, pards, an' keep in hearin' o' my call, fer there may be music afore mornin', yet, an' take ther poor lads heur to ther shanty an' fix 'em fer plantin', as they hain't no use on 'arth, now," and Grizzly Gabe motioned toward the three dead bodies, which some of the crowd at once took up and carried away.

"Now, leetle bit o' pard, what's in yer brain-box this time?" and the desperado followed Tiny Tim and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You are a man to do a bold job, if there is money in it, and not too much risk," boldly said Tiny Tim.

"Jist give me a trial, leetle pard."

"What was your trouble with that man and his son to-night?"

"Wouldn't licker up when I axed 'em to."

"Well, you nearly lost your life in the effort to make them do so, and I thought when I met you at the door and got you to go back and make the charge of robbery and murder against them, it would give you revenge."

"Guess yer wanted a leetle might o' revenge yerself."

"Yes, I did."

"It didn't work worth a cent, did it, leetle pard?"

"No."

"You had ter crawfish when ther ranchero tackled yer."

"I had my reasons for changing my mind."

"Yer knows this heur ranchero?"

"Yes."

"Who are he?"

"A Texan, who is known on the Rio Grande as Iron Arm, the Ranchero."

"He hev got a Gospil name, I'll sw'ar."

"You ought to know."

"I does know; well, you hates him."

"As Satan does holy water," fiercely answered the young man.

"Cut yer out with yer gal, maybe, in spite o' yer likely looks."

"My cause for hating him is none of your affair; but I do hate him with all my heart."

"You looks like a good hater."

"I am, and when I set myself on the trail of revenge I follow it to the end," said the young man with the same savage manner in which he had before spoken.

"And yer is on the revenge trail now, leetle pard?"

"Yes."

"You looks quite young ter be runnin' round this country killin' folks."

"My age has nothing to do with you, any more than my motives; I offer to hire you for some dirty work, and I wish to know if you will do it?"

"You has ther wealth ter pay?"

"Yes."

"You'd make such a putty angel I've got half a mind ter kill yer an' take yer tin."

"Try it," and the muzzle of a revolver was pressed against the heart of the desperado with a quickness he had not believed possible, and he sung out:

"I was jokin', leetle pard; my hokey, but yer must hev been teachd ter draw a we'pin in ther same school thet durned ranchero I'arnt in."

"He taught me; now no more joking with me, but say if you will do the work."

"Yes, ef you has ther metal."

"How much do you want?"

"What's ter be did?"

"First, I wish you to get possession of the girl."

"The gal; what gal?"

"Ah! I had forgotten; you will not betray me if I tell you a secret?"

"No, we is pards."

"Well, that youngster you thought was a boy is a girl."

"Ther Holy Rockies!"

"It is true, and they, her father and herself, are going to a relative's who lives on the Birdwood, I believe."

"Yas; what's his name?"

"Ramsey Preston."

"I knows him by sight; he's got a ranch thar, an' is ther cattle-king o' these parts; but he won't welcome no one thar, though they do say he hev changed of late."

"Well, they are going there to live, and you must in some way get possession of the girl and let me know, for I intend to live here."

"Got any biz, leetle pard?"

"Gambling."

"Thet are enough ef yer 'tends ter it well, an' yer looks like a sharper with keards."

"I play to win; now you know one thing I wish you to do, and if you get the girl in your power I will pay you five hundred dollars."

"How do I know that?"

"Here are a hundred dollars as a bonus," and he placed a roll of bills in the hand of the desperado.

"Thet are squar', leetle pard; but does yer want me ter fetch her ter you heur?"

"No; is there not some secret place where you can take her?"

"Thar are a island on the South Platte whar I has a hidin'-place."

"Take her there then, and let me know; but mind you, do not harm her in any way."

"I won't; is thet all yer wants done?"

"No, I wish Iron Arm, the Ranchero, also made prisoner."

"I'd a heap ruther kill him, fer he hain't no cheerful bein' ter handle."

"Can you not capture him in some way with the aid of your comrades? I am in no hurry."

"I'll consider; but what does yer pay fer ther job?"

"One thousand dollars."

"How does I know?"

"Here are two hundred on account," and the bills were placed in the greedy hand of Grizzly Gabe, who said, with enthusiasm:

"You is a perfect gold mine, leetle pard; doesn't yer want suthin' else did fer duckits?"

"If I do I will know where to find you; I am at the Platte House, so come there when you need me— Great God! what is that?"

Both Grizzly Gabe and Tiny Tim turned quickly, for up the street came a snow-white horse at full speed, and neighing wildly, while upon his back was strapped a dark object that was shrieking one moment as if in anguish, and the next bursting into demoniacal laughter.

Past them, like the very wind, sped the white steed and his strange rider, bringing the keepers of late hours to the doors, and the sleepers

to the windows in dire alarm, to catch only a glimpse of what seemed to be a phantom horse and maniac rider flying through the town, and sending a thrill of horror through the hearts of all beholders.

"It are a spook critter an' ther devil are ther rider," stuttered Grizzly Gabe, and he bounded away in sheer fright, leaving Tiny Tim pale and trembling, for he had seen that which he believed also to be not of the earth, but from the spirit-land.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES.

A SHORT while previous to the phantom-like steed and its bound rider, flying through the moonlit streets of North Platte, a horseman was riding leisurely along in the direction of the village.

He was mounted on a superb animal, with jet-black, glossy hide, armed with a belt of weapons, and a rifle slung at his back, and was attired in full Mexican costume.

When within a few miles of the village of North Platte, he halted at a stream to allow his horse to drink, and dismounted himself to slake his thirst at the cool spring water that ran down between two high sand-hills.

Having partaken of a refreshing draught he was about to mount, when suddenly around the hillside swept a white horse.

"Great God! it is the horse bearing Alita," he cried, excitedly, at the same time throwing himself into his saddle, and seemingly about to fly as though from some hideous phantom.

But with a wild neigh the white horse, which was coming directly toward him, suddenly swerved from his course, and darted away toward the Platte river, which was visible some miles ahead winding through the level prairie, and looking like a silver serpent in the moonlight.

And, as the horse sped on, there suddenly broke on the air a wild burst of laughter, that caused the horseman to place his hands over his ears to shut out the hideous sound.

"God in heaven! she still lives!" he groaned, rather than said, and for some moments he stood in silence, watching the flying steed.

At last the white object disappeared in the sand-hills, and the horseman rode slowly on in the direction of North Platte, muttering earnestly:

"Heaven grant that I see her no more; but she has taken the trail I follow."

But with the disappearance of the specter-like steed and rider, he seemed to gain courage, and urged his horse into a gallop, and held steadily on his course, until the waters of the North Platte were not far away.

Then suddenly, up out of the long prairie grass that grew along the banks of a slough, bounded the white steed with its strange rider, and quickly the horseman drew rein, while once more on the night air burst that wild, maniacal laughter.

"God in heaven! I cannot stand this! better that she die at once," he cried, and he swung his rifle around ready for use.

In the mean time the white steed had halted immediately on the trail in his front, and not seventy yards away, and like a marble statue stood regarding him, while the bound rider upon his back lay silent and motionless.

Raising his rifle, and with a nervous, trembling manner, he glanced his eye along the barrel, and brought the sight to bear upon the bound form upon the white steed's back, while his own horse stood as quiet as though carved out of stone.

Twice he touched the trigger, but his aim did not suit him, and he refrained from pulling, and again took aim.

At last, confident that he held his nerves under control, he gave the fatal touch, the rifle flashed, and the bullet sped onward.

But the white steed stood as motionless as marble, and from the bound rider's lips broke again the wild laughter, this time in mockery.

He was about to turn and fly, wholly unnerved, for he was not a man to miss his mark, when, with a loud neigh, the white steed bounded away and once more disappeared in the distance.

The lights of North Platte were now visible in the distance, and following the trail to the river he crossed to the other side, and rode up to the door of the Overland Rest, just as the excited crowd that had seen the Specter Mazeppa returned to the saloon for a drink to calm their nerves, and to talk over the strange circumstance.

As he hitched his horse to a post, and entered the saloon, a man stood regarding him, and slowly followed, as if seemingly recognizing in him a familiar face and form.

Walking the length of the saloon he approached the table where Dave Perry sat, conversing with the person whom the reader has already doubtless recognized as Berkley Preston, and the eyes of the latter and the stranger met.

"What! is this not my cousin, Ramsey Preston?" and Berkley Preston sprung to his feet.

"Yes, I am Ramsey Preston, and you are

Berkley; I recognize you now, and warmly welcome you; Perry, how are you? I see that you already know my cousin," and Ramsey Preston spoke in a free and easy way that seemed natural to him.

"Yes, we have not known each other long, pard, but we've been quite intimate in that time I may say; here, Blue, do you want us to catch fire? Bring us a bottle," and Dave Perry called to one of his bar-tenders, who promptly obeyed.

But, as he placed the bottle and glasses upon the table, a tall form suddenly glided forward, a hand of iron fell upon the shoulder of Ramsey Preston, a revolver muzzle was pressed against his temple, and a stern voice said quickly:

"Bianca, the Hyena of the Chaparrals, you are my prisoner."

Ramsey Preston did not move, nor did his face change color; but seeing that it was Iron Arm, the Ranchero, who had thus addressed him, Dave Perry called out:

"Hold on, pard, for you're off the trail this time, as this gent is a Nebraska cattleman."

"Yes, and my cousin, sir, Mr. Ramsey Preston," said Berkley Preston.

Lucien De Leon simply moved around in front of the man he still covered with his revolver, and gazed earnestly into his face, while he said slowly:

"I don't often make mistakes, gentlemen, and among ten thousand I would denounce this man as the Hyena of the Chaparrals, the worst scourge that Texas has ever known."

"My name, sir, is Ramsey Preston, and the last five years of my life have been passed near this town, as there are many to prove; but I pardon your error, as when in Texas years ago, I was often mistaken for that monster, Bianca."

"May I not ask your name, and that you join us in a drink?"

Ramsey Preston had spoken with perfect coolness, and with no show of annoyance or anger in tone or manner, and a puzzled look crossed the face of Lucien De Leon: but he was not the man to wrong one and not make ample amends for it, and he said, in his frank way:

"From my heart I beg you to pardon me, Mr. Preston; but, excepting that you wear a beard, which Bianca did not, you are the image of that devil, and I'll wager that any one of my Texas cowboys, who have just gone back to my herd on the prairie, will mistake you for him."

"It being my mistake, we'll wash it out with a bottle of wine at my expense."

The wine was brought, and the party of four laughed merrily over the mistake made by the ranchero, and then discussed the one theme that seemed to be upon every tongue—the Phantom Mazeppa.

But though the reader will remember that Lucien De Leon had once met the white steed and bound rider on the open prairie, and given chase, he made no remarks thereon, and Ramsey Preston also remained silent upon the subject, so there were none present to solve the Mazeppa mystery.

It being now after midnight, Dave Perry suggested that it was bedtime, and invited Ramsey Preston to remain with him, as he had a cabin next door with half a dozen rooms in it, and his cousin was already his guest.

Ramsey Preston accepted the invitation, his horse was sent to the stable, and promising to see them in the morning Lucien De Leon took his departure, for he had already secured a room at the hotel.

"I'd better go over with you, pard, for you are too fine a fellow to be shot in the back, and I am confident that Grizzly Gabe and his gang mean you harm," said Dave Perry.

"No, I shun no man, and if they catch me off guard they are welcome; good-night," and the young ranchero boldly walked out into the moonlight, and wended his way to the Platte House.

The clerk in attendance was asleep in a chair, and knowing where his room was, Lucien De Leon took up a few matches and went there along the dark corridor.

Opening the door he stepped within, and was about to light a match, when a severe blow fell upon his head, and clutching at his pistols he sunk insensible upon the floor.

"Now, pards, I guesses thet blow tuk ther iron out o' his arm, and we'll jist carry him ter safer parts as soon as we hev tied him with this heur lariat."

"Be quick, fer thet dose we give thet office boss hain't goin' ter make him sleep till kingdom come."

The speaker was Grizzly Gabe, and aided by Gospel Luke and two others of his band, he quickly bound the unconscious ranchero, and bore him away in their arms.

Truly had Iron Arm fallen into the hands of his foes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PLEDGE.

WHATEVER excitement there might have been under the shadow of night in North Platte, the place certainly looked dull enough when the

morning sun arose, for the saloons were closed, the shop doors not yet opened, and only an occasional human being visible in the deserted streets.

But hardly had the sun risen above the horizon, when the door of the commodious cabin of Dave Perry, and which adjoined his saloon, opened, and four persons came out.

These four the reader has met before, for they were the two Prestons, Arta in her disguise of a youth, and Dave Perry himself.

Their horses were soon brought from the stable, Arta mounting Red Ranger, the steed that had belonged to Mert Mabrey, her father riding the mustang he had brought from Leavenworth, and Ramsey Preston riding his black.

"I'll tell the ranchero that you thought it best to start at once for the ranch, on account of getting your daughter out of this disguise, and we may ride out to see you some day," said Dave.

"All right, Perry, you will be ever welcome; good-by," and Ramsey Preston rode away, followed by his cousin and Arta.

For some time they conversed only on ordinary topics, and after crossing the Platte, branched away up the north fork to avoid a large herd of cattle that was slowly moving along, driven by a score of herders.

"That is the herd of that Texan, De Leon, that I have heard was on the way, for see, the cattle look gaunt and fagged from their long drive," remarked Ramsey Preston.

"He has a ranch near here, I believe," said Arta, whose face was yet pale from the effects of the scenes she had passed through.

"Yes, a ranchero pard he sent on ahead has homesteaded for him on the Dismal river, some sixty or seventy miles north, and about thirty from where I have my main ranch, so we will be neighbors, if, from all you tell me about him, his hot head does not get him into trouble."

"He is not hot-headed, but as cool a man in danger as I ever saw; his coolness certainly saved father's life and mine last night," replied Arta, with some warmth.

"And doubtless made him a hero in the eyes of my sweet cousin, although she never saw him before last night," said Ramsey Preston.

"You are mistaken, cousin Ramsey; I have met Mr. De Leon before."

A dark flash swept over the face of Ramsey Preston at her words; but he said lightly:

"Indeed! I deemed him a perfect stranger to you."

"In one sense of the word he is, Ramsey," put in Berkley, "but, as Arta says, we have met him before, and received kindnesses at his hands."

"You surprise me."

"The truth is, after all my misfortune—"

"Which my extravagances and speculations brought upon you, Berk."

"We will not speak of that, cousin, for that is in the past, and you have the satisfaction of knowing now that your hospitality alone keeps my child and myself from starving, for oh! we were so very poor; but to continue my story of where we saw this Texas ranchero before."

"It was when I moved into a little cottage house, after the death of my wife, that a stranger stopped one night and asked for shelter, which I cheerfully granted."

"That night he heard Arta sing, although she was a mere girl, and asked if he might send a souvenir of his short visit."

"Ah!" said Ramsey Preston, with something of a sneer in his tone.

"The souvenir he sent, true to promise, and was a guitar of rare workmanship and great value, and made to order, for he had Arta's and his own initials inlaid in the wood."

"He was most generous."

"He was indeed, cousin Ramsey," answered Arta, not noticing the sarcasm in her cousin's voice, as she suspected no reason for it.

"Well, what then?" he asked.

"Why Arta prized that guitar above everything, and when year by year misfortune and poverty dogged my footsteps, and we came at last to the verge of starvation, it was the only article of value that remained to us."

"You did indeed prize the gift of a stranger, Arta."

"He seemed not a stranger to me, cousin Ramsey."

"No doubt; but where is this valuable souvenir now?"

"Ah! I had to part with it; when hours went by and neither father nor myself had had anything to eat, I took it out to pawn it, but, seized with a sudden impulse to make an effort to save it, in passing the club, the rich members of which were my father's friends in his prosperity, but knew him not in his poverty, I stood in the shadow of a tree and sung several ballads, and a liberal subscription was raised for me, for I saw many bank bills thrown into the hat."

"But, alas! the one who brought me the generous donation basely insulted me, and for it was knocked down by a gentleman who had been standing near by in the street, listening to my singing."

"In the confusion that followed he thrust a roll of bills into my hand, and, confused and frightened, I ran off, and reached home, not

knowing I had the money until father discovered it."

"Why, this was most romantic; and you saved your priceless guitar?"

"Then I did, cousin Ramsey, for the money was two hundred dollars, which was sufficient to bring us to Leavenworth; but there I had to sell my treasure to get horses with to continue on our journey to this place."

"And who was this young man, Arta?" asked Ramsey Preston, quietly.

"The same who gave me the guitar, for I recognized him, as he stood under the bright light shining from the club windows."

"The one who learned to love you when you were hardly in your teens?"

"I did not say that, cousin Ramsey; he seemed devoted to music, sung well himself, and as father would take no pay from him for the three days he stopped with us, he seemed to wish to repay the debt in some way."

"Three days! why, he tarried long."

"The two days after his arrival it stormed fearfully, and the third was Sunday, and father begged him to remain."

"Didn't require much begging, I guess, sweet cousin."

"No, he seemed willing to remain."

"Strange you did not make yourself known to him when he came to your defense in front of the club."

Arta's face flushed, but she made no reply, and her father said:

"Well, it does seem strange how that young man has crossed our paths."

"Who he is, other than that his name is Lucien De Leon, and that he seems a gentleman, while undoubtedly he is a man of indomitable nerve and courage, I know not; but certainly he may ever count on me as his friend."

Again a dark flush crossed the face of Ramsey Preston, but he said pleasantly:

"Well, cousin mine, you shall not lose your priceless guitar, for I will send to Leavenworth and buy it back for you."

"Thank you, oh thank you!" and the maiden's eyes flashed with delight.

"Now let us talk business, for I am now in a position, Berk, to return your kindnesses of years ago by giving you at least a house to live in."

"I felt that you would not turn us away."

"No, indeed, and I will let you have the Birdwood ranch; it is located delightfully, some fifteen miles from where I live, can be made most comfortable, and the herd on it numbers half a thousand."

"Ramsey, my cousin, you overwhelm me with gratitude to you; but I can never repay you," said Berkeley Preston, fervently.

"All I request is, that when I ask you, Berk, and you, Arta, to pay me for the Birdwood ranch and herd, you will do so."

"Will you pledge yourselves to do this?" and Ramsey Preston laughed lightly.

"Willingly, cousin," answered Berk Preston.

"And you, Arta?"

"I will pledge myself with my father, cousin, if I have a claim in it."

"Enough, I ask no more, and the property is yours; but we will go by my ranch to-night, and I can rig you out in some feminine garb, Arta, left by my poor Mexican bride," and a look of deep sadness crossed the face of the cattle king.

"You married in Mexico, then, Ramsey?" asked Mr. Preston, with interest.

"Yes; but we will not speak of poor Alita, who left me one day and I have never seen her since; but her clothing, Arta, you shall fall heir to, as she was about your size."

"Come, we follow this trail that leads away from the river," and Ramsey Preston spurred on ahead; but there was a look in his face that was stern and gloomy, as though called there by the remembrance of the bride he had lost.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DOUBLE MYSTERY.

WHEN he deemed it time for the Texas ranchero to be up, Dave Perry went up to the Platte House to see him, and upon inquiry was informed by the clerk that he had not seen Mr. De Leon that morning.

Going up to his room, Dave received no answer to his knock, and pushed the door open, to suddenly become convinced that something was wrong.

The cause of this conclusion was at first discovering that the bed had not been slept in, and then seeing upon the bare floor—for carpets were a luxury not used in North Platte hotels in those days—a pool of blood, with evidence of general disorder in the room, for a chair was overturned, and the candlestick lay near the window.

Hastily returning to the office he made known his discovery, and there learned that the night-clerk had been found stupidly drunk in the morning, as had also the hostler who slept at the stable, but it was supposed that they had been drinking heavily.

Seeking out these worthies, Dave, after a great effort aroused them, and at once decided that they had been drugged, and to bear out

this theory, they both told the same story, that a stranger, they thought a cowboy, had given them a drink from his flask.

To the clerk he had said that he wanted a room for the night, and was assigned one, and that was all he could tell about him, while the stableman had said a stranger had come and asked to have his horse put up, and had been so friendly as to offer him a drink.

But the stranger had not occupied the room assigned him, and his horse was gone from the stable, and the animal left there by Lucien De Leon was also missing.

"Pards, there has been foul play here, and I'm going to make it hot for the one that has gotten away with that Texan," said Dave Perry, firmly, after he had made these discoveries, and going to the jail he told Ben Fanshaw, who was keeper as well as constable, to look up Grizzly Gabe and send him to the Overland Rest.

"Has yer lost anybody, brother Dave?" asked Gospel Luke, who was passing the jail as Dave turned away.

"Yes, and if I didn't think you were such a darned rascal, Luke, I'd let you into a little game at which you would make something."

"Brother Perry, 'tis ever ther innocent that gets slandered, and I has my share; but at heart I is as gentle as the sucking dove," and Gospel Luke rolled his eyes piously heavenward.

"You are a gentle liar, Luke; but, if you want your bitters for the rest of this week, just cross the Platte and overtake those Texans driving their herd to the Dismal river, and ask half a dozen of them to come back here."

"Don't do it, Dave, fer they is like a all-devouring lion let loose; I wants my bitters, for a leetle for the stomach's sake is good, an' accordin' ter Scriptur', but I don't want them wild mustangers in this peaceful village."

"Very well, I will send some one else."

"Nary, for he would get the bitters, an' I stan's in need of 'em; I go, brother Perry, ter do thy biddin', for yonder is my gothic steed lariat on the pararer," and Gospel Luke pointed to a rawboned mustang that looked as evil as did his master.

Upon returning to the Overland Rest Dave found there a visitor awaiting him.

It was Tiny Tim, looking fresh and smiling, and dressed in his usual dandylike manner.

"Mr. Perry, I've called on you, sir, to ask you to aid me in a little matter," he said, pleasantly.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" and Dave fixed his sharp eyes upon the handsome face of the young man.

"You are aware, from what occurred last night, that I was coming west with my pard, Mert Mabrey by name, and that he mysteriously left camp and was killed?"

"Yes, and you falsely accused two innocent persons of his murder," bluntly said Dave.

"True, but acknowledged my mistake; now, sir, I will give one thousand dollars if you will solve a mystery for me."

"You are flush for a youngster."

"I am able to pay what I offer, and I will give one thousand dollars to be brought face to face with a man the image of my dead pard, Mert Mabrey."

"Does such a man exist?"

"There does, or—"

"Why do you pause, pard?"

"Or it is his ghost."

"You believe in ghosts, then?"

"It is not my nature, or was not before last night; but then this Phantom Mazeppa went flying through town, and it so impressed me that, to shake off the feeling I mounted my horse and took the trail of the weird steed and seemingly spectral, or mad rider."

"You were plucky, for none other cared to do it."

"I did it to quiet the supernatural awe that was getting the mastery of me."

"Well?"

"It is not well."

"You saw the Phantom Mazeppa, then?"

"I saw it ahead of me, and rode rapidly in pursuit, but though my horse has few equals the white steed went away from me as though I was standing still."

"This is remarkable; but what has this to do with your friend, who lies buried in the cottonwoods?"

"It has this to do with it—there are a pair of ghosts abroad on the prairie."

"The devil you say! don't say that, pard, or I'll emigrate East, for I like more solid companions than ghosts."

"You need not joke."

"I'm as solemn as a toper before his morning nip; but what is this second phantom like?"

"My friend who lies in the cottonwoods," and Tiny Tim spoke in a low whisper.

"Do you mean it?" asked Dave Perry, impressed with the words and manner of the young man.

"I do; he came toward me at a slow pace, and believing him merely some prairie man I only placed myself on guard against a sudden attack; but as he drew nearer I noticed that there was something familiar in the form and

dress of the horseman, and as the moonlight shone full upon him to my horror I recognized my dead pard."

"Well, what then?"

"I drew rein, called him by name, and then, as he came directly toward me, looking me squarely in the face with his large eyes, it was more than I could stand, and I gave a yell that sent my horse flying from him over the prairie."

"Did he pursue?"

"No."

"He did not stop?"

"No, but continued directly on in the trail of the Mad Mazeppa."

"This was indeed strange; what kind of a horse was he on?"

"Snow white."

"How near were you to him?"

"Two lengths."

"He made no motion?"

"Yes, he raised his hand and pointed across the prairie, and I took the hint and left."

"And it is this man you wish to meet again?"

"Yes, to satisfy myself if he be a real being or the ghost of Mert Mabrey."

"Find such a personage for me anywhere around the Platte and I'll pay one thousand dollars to the one who finds him."

"I'll describe him to the boys, and if there is a person answering his description within a week's ride of here the reward will fetch him, if the boys have to kill him to get him here."

"Write a description of your dead friend, or the one you saw on horseback, and give it to me."

"A description of one is a fac-simile of the other," and Tiny Tim quickly wrote the description asked for by Dave Perry, and then asked:

"Is there any way you can solve this Phantom Mazeppa mystery?"

"None; the voice is that of a woman, and I know no horse in these parts that has the speed of the one that went flying through the town last night."

"And last night was the first time it appeared here?"

"Yes, to my knowledge; but I have heard several of the boys have seen the Mazeppa before on the prairie."

"Well, it is strange."

"So strange that I'll give a thousand dollars to the man who solves the mystery for me; but now tell me, did you know that the Texas ranchero, the one they call Iron Arm is missing this morning?" and Dave Perry looked squarely into the face of Tiny Tim, and the start of surprise proved that he had not heard the news.

"No; no foul play I hope," he said, quietly.

"I fear so; come, let us see what the noise outside means."

Rising, they went to the door, and just then Grizzly Gabe and several of his comrades rode up, and their faces were haggard and horses hard ridden.

"Pard Perry, we wants a trio o' benzine all round, fer we started on a run fer buflers, shortly afore day, and we seen a ghost."

"A ghost, Grizzly Gabe?"

"Yas, Dave, a factotem ghost; it were ther same as run through ther town last night."

"The Phantom Mazeppa."

"That are ther flyin' honey, an' we needs benzine ter collect our narves, fer they is cursedly shattered," and Grizzly Gabe and his comrades passed on into the Overland Rest, while Tiny Tim departed for his hotel, leaving Dave Perry considerably impressed with the weird stories he had heard of the supernatural, and a solution of which was beyond his ken.

CHAPTER XX.

CHASED BY A PHANTOM.

LUCIEN DE LEON was not the man to succumb to an ordinary blow; but the one he had received, upon entering his room, was so wholly unexpected, and delivered with such right good will by Grizzly Gabe, and with the heavy barrel of his revolver, that it stunned the ranchero, and cut a gash in his scalp from which the blood flowed freely.

Wholly unconscious at first, he was a helpless victim in the hands of his captors, and was securely bound and carried to the stable, where he was tied upon his own horse, the drugged hostler offering no opposition.

Placing two of his companions on either side of the prisoner's horse, and one behind, while he rode in front, so as to wholly conceal him from any curious eyes, Grizzly Gabe led the way out of the town, and headed across the prairie toward the South Platte.

Secretly the leader of a band of road-agents, who, under the cover of disguises, were wont to pounce down upon unprotected wagon-trains and small settlements, while they were horse and cattle thieves, in general, Grizzly Gabe knew every part of the country thoroughly between the Bad Lands of Dakota and the Arkansas river, and had established three rendezvous, or strongholds, for retreat in case of danger or discovery, and as supplies for his stolen stock and plunder.

One of these was upon the Loup Fork, another Rock creek, a branch flowing into the Republican, and the third upon an island in the South Platte, and not very many miles from North Platte.

It was to this latter place that he intended to take Iron Arm, under the guard of several of his band who constantly remained there, until he got his reward from Tiny Tim.

Feeling assured that no one had seen his kidnapping of the ranchero, and congratulating himself upon the balance of the reward which he would soon finger, Grizzly Gabe rode along in a pleasing frame of mind, carefully plotting how he was to capture Arta Preston and win his other hundreds, while his comrades jogged along on their mustangs, all seemingly satisfied that the dangerous man in their midst was wholly in their power, for he seemed to be still unconscious, and was securely bound, hand and foot, to his horse.

"Rocks o' Gibraltar! look thar, pards!"

The cry broke from one of the band, and all came to a halt and gazed behind them, seemingly expecting to behold a band of Indians rushing upon them; for the one who had given vent to the exclamation, was gazing back the way they had come.

"Holy smoke! it ar' thet cussed white horse an' ther howlin' Mazeppy, or I are in a wilderness o' liars," cried Grizzly Gabe, who had been considerably shaken up when the Phantom Mazeppa had dashed through the town.

"It are comin' fer us, pard," said one.

"It are, an' what's ter be did?" cried another.

"I'll try cold lead an' hot powder," suggested Grizzly Gabe, unslinging his rifle.

"Don't do it, cap'n, don't do it, or ther ghost will scoop us in; let's sling a leetle prayer music at him," impressively said one.

"I'll sling hoofs, I will; I doesn't like ther citter; come!" and Grizzly Gabe set off on a run, and his comrades started to follow him.

But here trouble came for them, as Flash refused to run, apparently not liking his master bound upon his back.

In vain Grizzly Gabe cursed, pulled, and coaxed; Flash was obstinate, and the Phantom Mazeppa was coming rapidly on.

"Curse ther brute, he shell carry a dead load," yelled Grizzly Gabe, and drawing a revolver he leveled it at the body of Iron Arm and fired.

At the shot Flash reared wildly, tore himself loose from the man that was holding him, and skurried away across the prairie at a speed the robber band wished their mustangs could equal, for they were now thoroughly alarmed at the near approach of the White Phantom, which held steadily on in pursuit of them, while they, with quirts, spurs, and curses, urged their horses to their utmost speed.

In the mean time Flash sped across the prairie like the wind; but, after running a mile or more, suddenly slackened his speed and came to a dead halt.

Then the form on his back moved, writhed a few moments, and then dropped to the ground, while the deep tones of Lucien De Leon said:

"Well, that accursed lariat was bound so tight I feared I could never get it off; but I am free once more, and I owe it to the Phantom Mazeppa.

"And I know who were my captors, too.

"Well, Grizzly Gabe, you gave me a good blow, and your shot was meant to kill, but my skull is too thick to break easily, and this gold Texas star I wear glanced the bullet; but I owe you a return, and will pay it some day, and with full interest.

"By the Lord Harry, how those devils ran at sight of the Mazeppa, and they'll not stop at the river, either.

"Well, I will now head for my ranoh, and as soon as I feel myself again, I'll pay another visit to North Platte.

"Come, Flash, we must overtake the herd, and it's a good jump ahead."

So saying, Iron Arm sprang into his saddle, and, at a swinging gallop, the noble horse started over the prairie, bearing to the right, so as to make a wide circuit of the village, and reach the crossing of the North Fork.

As he approached the river he saw a horseman slowly approaching him.

He was mounted on a white horse, and as he drew near, even Iron Arm started, for the man whom he saw pass by him with a strange stare, was one whom he believed dead.

"By Heaven! that was Merton Mabrey, or—his ghost," he muttered, and he drew rein and looked back, but the horseman rode on as before, casting no look behind him, and as bolt upright in the saddle as though he was frozen.

For a moment Iron Arm hesitated, seemingly not knowing what to do, and then he carefully looked at his arms, which Grizzly Gabe had not deprived him of, as though intending to return in pursuit of the horseman, whose presence so strangely moved him.

A few steps he then retraced his way, and, coming to a halt, muttered:

"I must be mistaken, and I care not for trouble, now, so will solve the matter another way.

"I will visit the grave in the cottonwoods,

and it will tell the story of who lies buried there.

"Come, Flash, we'll seek the nearest timber, and camp by day and travel by night," and Iron Arm headed southward to take the trail leading across the South Platte.

CHAPTER XXI.

PURSuing A SPECTER.

AFTER her severe exercise, and the exciting adventures of the past few days, Arta Preston was not as bright as she wished to be, and consequently her cousin Ramsey rode slowly, and halted often during the long day's ride to his ranch.

With these halts it was sunset, and the party had some miles yet to go.

But Ramsey Preston rendered himself most agreeable; talked of the great profits in cattle-raising in Nebraska to Mr. Preston, and told of his travels and adventures to Arta, and made the miles seem shorter by his brilliant conversational powers and wit, while, as the moon rose above the horizon, he broke forth in song, and surprised the maiden with the richness and pathos of his voice, until a certain dislike for her cousin, which had been creeping over her, vanished entirely, and she felt that she had wronged him in the belief that she first held of him.

"Do you see that glimmering light, Arta—there, just above the prairie horizon, like a rising star?" asked Ramsey Preston, suddenly breaking off in a song, and pointing far ahead as they went over a roll in the prairie.

Arta's quick eye caught sight of the distant light, and saying so, her cousin went on:

"Well, that is my home; the spot where I have dwelt the past few years, contented if not happy, my only intimate companion Sancho, a Mexican.

"After Alita's mysterious disappearance I became, as it were, a hermit, dwelling wholly apart from the world, and scouts, trappers and travelers who came this way gave me the name of being an inhospitable old brute.

"At last I learned from a friend in New York, to whom I wrote, to look up your father and yourself, that you had started West to come to my home, and instantly I became a changed man, for I cast off sorrow, let the past bury its dead, and will be more than happy in your sweet presence and the friendship of your father, for I intend to be most neighborly."

"I hope you will, cousin Ramsey, for you may expect father and myself to surprise you many a morning at breakfast."

"Do so, Arta, and you will find a warm welcome and a good breakfast, for Sancho is a fine cook—God in heaven! see there!"

All drew rein at the startled exclamation, and beheld, right in their trail, as though he had suddenly risen out of the ground, a snow-white steed.

And upon his back the moonlight plainly showed, was a rider, strapped at full length, and the clothing, and long hair, trailing in the prairie grass, revealed the fact that it was a woman.

"The Phantom Mazeppa," whispered Berkley Preston.

"If it be the devil himself it shall no longer haunt my path," cried Ramsey Preston and driving his spurs deep into the flanks of his horse he bounded forward.

"Oh, cousin Ramsey! what would you do?" called out Arta, in alarm.

"Ramsey, come back, for the love of God!" cried Berkley Preston.

But the man was set in his sudden determination, and rode directly for the white steed, which, with head erect, stood not sixty yards away.

But suddenly there came a wild, ringing neigh, and it was followed by a burst of mocking, demoniacal laughter, and wheeling to the right about the white animal went away like the wind.

"Curse you, you shall not escape, for I will follow you to the confines of hell," shrieked Ramsey Preston, and he tore the flanks of his splendid steed to urge him on in the chase.

And, maddened by the pain, frightened at the wild manner of his master, that ever before had treated him with such gentleness, the noble horse bounded forward at his utmost speed, and seemed to fly over the prairie.

"Curse you, beast, you are creeping, and yonder horse, phantom, devil, or whatever it is, is going like a bird," shouted Ramsey Preston, and drawing his knife he drove the point sharply into the flesh of the animal to urge him on.

But, strive as he might, the white steed in advance was the superior in speed, and slowly drew away from his pursuer.

Maddened at sight of this, Ramsey Preston threw his rifle forward and fired.

But still the spectral-looking steed flew on.

Drawing his revolvers, shot after shot was sent after the flying animal, and back in response came a wild neigh and mocking laughter.

"Great God! it is her voice; but, no, she cannot be alive; no, no, no, she is dead and yonder bound form is her spirit."

The man, as this thought came over him,

reeled in the saddle, his head grew dizzy, his strength forsook him, and he fell in a heap upon the prairie, while his faithful horse, forgiving his cruelty, turned and stood by his side, while he neighed loudly to attract the attention of Mr. Preston and Arta, who had lost sight of pursuer and pursued.

But hearing the call of the horse they changed their course and came to the spot rapidly.

"What! can he be dead?" cried Mr. Preston, in alarm, springing from his horse and kneeling by the side of his cousin.

"I heard firing, and he must be wounded; yes, he lives, and I will bear him to the ranch as rapidly as possible, while you, Arta, ride on and have all in readiness for our coming."

Away darted the maiden over the prairie, heading directly for the now plainly visible light in the ranch, and raising his cousin's limp form to the back of his own horse, Berkley Preston mounted and slowly followed.

Hearing the rapid hoof-strokes, the watchful Sancho came out ready to greet friend or foe, and was somewhat startled at sight of a strange youth, for, in her disguise, he suspected not the sex of the visitor.

"Is this Sancho?" asked Arta.

"That is my name, señor."

"Well, your master has fallen from his horse and my father is coming on with him."

"You mean Señor Ramsey Preston?"

"Yes."

"I heard firing, and saw pistol flashes out on the prairie; was the señor shot?"

"I know not; he was riding with us and we were coming here, when we saw a white horse, and on its back—"

"Holy Mother preserve me; I saw the same twice, señor, and it is a fearful sight; did my master see and hear it?"

"Yes, and went in pursuit, and we found him lying unconscious upon the prairie, so prepare for his arrival, please."

"I will, señor; only that ghostly horse and rider are fearful to look upon; oh, señor, there is trouble coming for the señor and Sancho," and the Mexican entered the cabin and soon had lights ready, and the cot bed prepared for his master's reception.

A moment after Berkley Preston rode up, and Arta gave a sigh of relief to see her cousin was mounted upon his own horse.

"That accursed horse fell with me, and I was stunned by the fall," he said, hoarsely, ashamed of his weakness.

"It was for following the trail of the dead, señor; no mortal must pursue a spirit," whispered Sancho, significantly.

"Shut up, and prepare beds for my friends here," was the angry retort of Ramsey Preston, and the look on his face and tone of his voice caused that feeling of dislike to once more well up against him in the heart of Arta Preston, and she watched him closely as she told the story of the adventure of her father and herself with the Phantom Mazeppa, and how the wolves had been then hanging like bloodhounds on the trail of the white steed.

CHAPTER XXII.

GRIZZLY GABE ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Grizzly Gabe returned to North Platte, and reported to Tiny Tim his successful capture of Lucien De Leon, the Iron Arm, and then the fright that had caused him to fly and leave the balky horse and his rider, that young gentleman was in no pleasant mood, and remarked:

"There are certain things to be done that are necessary to my safety and happiness in life, and to accomplish those ends I am willing to pay well, and I selected you as the tool to do my bidding."

"Oh, I works like a buzz-saw when I'm greased with gold-dust."

"So I believe, and you did well, and most skillfully captured Iron Arm; but you acted like a cowardly schoolboy to run from a spectral-looking horse on the prairie."

"Leetle pard, ef thet horse had been goin' the t'other way, I'd be ther gerloot ter go arter him; but he kept comin' straight fer us innocent children, an' we levanted."

"I tried ter carry ther Iron Arm's horse along, but 'twan't no use; he balked, an' all purgatory couldn't move him our way."

"Why didn't you kill the horse and take the man?"

"Thar wa'n't no time for swappin' jack-knives, leetle pard Tim, so I jist put a bullet in the man."

"What! you killed Iron Arm?" and Tiny Tim sprang to his feet, his face flushing and paling by turns.

"Thet's what I did, pard; he hed a blow on ther he'd as kept him as quiet as a poodle in a lady's lap, an' seein' as we c'u'dn't take him, I jist sent a thirty-two caliber into his life-works, an' away went the horse at full speed."

"You are sure you killed him?"

"Now, leetle pard, s'pose I were to put one o' these bullets in your body, don't you think your chances w'd be durned small ter keep yer toes from turnin' up?" and Grizzly Gabe showed the size of bullet his revolver carried.

"Well, here is a hundred dollars for you, and

if you bring proof that Iron Arm is dead, I will pay you the amount I promised; but I would have preferred to had him alive in my power.

"Now about the other work on hand."

"The honey?"

"Yes, capturing the girl."

"I are goin' ter do it."

"She has left the Platte."

"No!"

"Yes, she went with her father and cousin, early this morning."

"Good!"

"Why do you say so?"

"She has gone to the Birdwood?"

"Yes."

"I has quarters in the hills on the Loup Fork, and I can get her as slick as flyin' a kite."

"See that you do; but do not harm her."

"I is a tenderfoot among the gals, pard."

"And when you have her in your power send me word and I will come."

"I'll do it; now I'll strike out ter hunt ther Iron Arm's body, fer I are sartin he are cold meat."

"And more, I have another thousand dollars for you if you can bring me, dead or alive, a man answering this description," and Tiny Tim handed the desperado a slip of paper.

"That are writin', hain't it?" and Grizzly Gabe looked curiously at it.

"Yes."

"It hain't fine writin'."

"Indeed! I am said to write a very fine hand."

"Tain't fine 'nuff fer me ter peruse."

"Ah, I see; you don't bother yourself with reading?"

"No, it don't do a man no good ter read, fer books is full o' lies an' sich, an' I does like ter keep moral; guess yer'd better recite thet writin' fer me."

Tiny Tim did as requested, and Grizzly Gabe remarked:

"Waal, I are on ther way ter make a fortin, an' you is my banker, leetle pard."

"I are off at once, an' when I sets out on biz, I are all thar," and half an hour after the desperado and two boon pards rode out of town on the trail of blood-money.

But ere they had ridden far they beheld Gospel Luke coming, and with him were the mustangers from Texas.

"I doesn't like thet congregation, Hank, an' I wishes we c'u'd sarcumvent 'em; but we can't," growled Grizzly Gabe.

"What are Parson Luke doin' with 'em?" asked Hank.

"Lordy knows, fer thet are a slip'ry preacher o' Gospil, I sw'ar."

"Durned ef I ever knows whether he are prayin', preachin', cussin', or lyin'," put in Bedrock Mose, the second worthy with Grizzly Gabe.

"He do sling Gospil some, Bedrock, an' he are some on ther sw'ar, an' not 'way back down ther lane when lyin' are ther game; but we'll draw him away from them Texans, an' find out why he are keepin' sich comp'ny."

In the mean time, Gospel Luke and the Texans, some fifteen in number, for whom Dave Perry had sent him, had drawn pretty near, and it was evident that they intended to have a word with Grizzly Gabe and his comrades, for they suddenly drew rein, and their leader, Frank Fielding, a young and dashing fellow, called out:

"Halt, pards, and give us the news."

"Thar are no news," sulkily returned Grizzly Gabe.

"Therein you lie, for I learn from this eloquent divine, Gospel Luke, that we are wanted to take the trail of our captain, Iron Arm, the Ranchero, who got lost last night," and Frank Fielding fixed his piercing gray eyes upon the desperado, who answered:

"That are truth, pard, thet festive gent o' the iron grip hain't wisible this mornin', an' me an' my pards was jist goin' ter see ef we c'u'd find hair or hide o' him."

"How are you interested in Iron Arm?" asked Fielding, sharply.

"To ther tune o' one thousan' dollars."

"Indeed! who pays you this?"

"A pard o' Iron Grip, an' we is seein' ef we can't 'arn ther dust."

"If you find the captain I will pay you as much more," was the frank reply.

"Waal, you is squar," clean through, an' we'll struggle fer thet dust."

"An' I'll accompany thee, pard, for you will need consolation an' comfort," and Gospel Luke ranged himself alongside.

"You'll do nothin' o' ther kind, Gospel Luke, fer we wants workers, not prayers; good-by, pard Texas, an' ef we find Iron Grip, we'll look you up," and Grizzly Gabe rode on with his comrades, while the Texans went rapidly on toward the town, Gospel Luke remaining with them, as he did not like the look on the desperado's face, when he turned his eyes upon him, and felt that he was regarded with suspicion by those who had been his companions in deviltry.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MEETING IN THE COTTONWOODS.

It was late in the afternoon, when Lucien De Leon, now known as Iron Arm, the Ranchero,

rode into the shadow of the "timber island," where so many wild scenes had been enacted in the past, and that hid the grave at which Arta Preston had found the horse of Mert Mabrey.

Finding a secluded nook, Lucien concealed his horse there, giving him a drink from a crystal spring, and the length of the lariat to feed by, and, after bathing and bandaging the wound on his head, walked slowly in the direction of the grave, which the reader will remember he had before visited, when on the search for Berkeley Preston and his daughter.

He approached the spot cautiously, for he was a thorough prairie man, and knew that he was liable to find in the timber either red or white foes.

But seeing the way clear, after a close reconnoissance, he boldly stepped out of the brushwood and stalked toward the grave.

It remained as he had left it, excepting there were evidences that coyotes and wolves had been striving to tear the body from its earthly resting-place, but had been foiled by the logs and brush piled upon it.

Wishing to lose no time, and apparently with a certain object in view, he set to work at once, casting aside the logs and brush, and then hunting around for the crude piece of wood he had used as a shovel on his other visit, he began to throw out the earth.

Thus engaged, he failed to notice that he was not alone, and that the timber concealed other human being than himself.

That other was a man of herculean form, wore a long beard, and his shaggy hair hung upon his shoulders.

He was dressed in buckskin, carried a long, old-fashioned Kentucky rifle, a revolver and knife, and looked pale and haggard.

He had risen up from the ground, where he had been lying, as if aroused by the work of Lucien De Leon, and twice he raised his rifle, as though to fire, but each time shook his head and lowered it.

Then, leaning it against a tree he began to move as noiselessly as a panther could have done, toward the one who was slowly digging his way down into the grave.

Nearer and nearer he crept, until when within twenty feet of De Leon he saw him unfasten his belt of arms and cast them aside, as though they retarded his work.

Instantly, with a strange gleam in his face, the stranger unfastened the buckle of his belt, and cast the time-worn revolver and bone-handled, long-bladed knife upon the ground.

A moment more, and with the bound of a tiger, he was upon the Iron Arm, and at once a fierce struggle began.

Though taken by surprise, Iron Arm was not unnerved, and grasped his foe quickly for the death-struggle, and seemed to show no fear of the result in his face, although his assailant was almost a giant in size, being fully six feet five inches tall, and most heavily formed.

It was evident, when the stranger's first gripe upon Iron Arm's throat was torn off, and he felt the clutch of steel with which the ranchero grasped him, that he was surprised, for he had never before met his equal in strength, and had expected to easily make the young man a prisoner.

But, strive as he might, gripe with a force that seemed to crush the bones, and use all his power, the assailant found that he had for once met his master, for Iron Arm slowly, but surely, proved his right to the name he had won, and his supernatural strength soon held his enemy at his mercy.

"I could kill you, but I spare your life," he said, as he stepped back, after hurling his assailant to the ground.

"I know not whether to thank you or not," was the stern reply.

"You value life then little?"

"I value it not at all."

"Who and what are you?" asked Iron Arm, struck with the strange manner of the man.

"Do not ask me, for to tell you what I am would but tear open a wound of the past, and bring surging up sorrows that have fallen heavy upon me."

"Then I will not ask you; but why did you attempt my life?"

"I was mad, I believe, for I intended to torture you; twice I raised my rifle to kill you, but spared you, and conscious in my strength, I determined to take you alive and torture you to death."

In spite of himself Iron Arm shuddered, for he seemed to feel that the man before him was mad.

Then he said:

"I thank you for not killing me."

"You need not thank me, for my heart was murderous; but what power you have to handle me as you did."

Iron Arm smiled and asked:

"Why did you seek my life; I never wronged you?"

"You never wronged me, and yet you are defiling the grave of my boy, my noble dead son," said the man, sternly.

"Your son?"

"Ay, I speak the truth."

"Do you know who lies here?"

"What name bear you?"

"The same as he did who lies there," was the impressive response.

"And that is—"

"Mabrey."

"Hal! and was Mert Mabrey your son?" asked Iron Arm, with intense surprise.

"Merton Mabrey was my son."

A silence of a moment fell between them, and then Iron Arm said calmly:

"I believe you when you say he was your son, for even now I can see the resemblance; but I do not believe that Merton Mabrey lies in this grave."

"Good God thank you for those words; prove them, and I will worship you, boy," and the old man grasped Iron Arm by each shoulder and stared in his face with a look that was pleading, hoping and dreading commingled.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT THE GRAVE REVEALED.

WAITING until the man, who called himself Mabrey, grew calm, Iron Arm said:

"You sought to kill me because I was defiling this grave; what did you think was my purpose?"

"To rob my boy."

"You are mistaken."

"What then?"

"I have been told that Merton Mabrey was buried here, and I came to see."

"You knew him then?"

"Yes."

"And he was your friend?"

"Years ago he was."

"And you still loved him?"

"No."

"No; then why came you here?"

"I hated him."

"You hated my noble boy?"

"Yes."

"That could not be."

"It could be; if he lies there I forgive him the past; if he yet lives I hate him."

"Why do you hate my boy?"

"He wronged me bitterly in the past."

"No, no, he would not wrong you."

"I say yes, old man."

"There must be some mistake."

"There is none."

"Then hating him, why did you come here to his grave?"

"To see if Merton Mabrey was buried here."

"I tell you he is."

"How know you that?"

"I placed him in that grave."

"You?"

"Yes, I, his father."

"Then there can be no mistake?"

"No, alas! there is no mistake," was the sad response.

"May I ask how he died?"

"Yes," was the reply, and the old man said no more, and Iron Arm continued:

"He was killed, doubtless?"

"Yes."

"By Indians?"

"No."

"Some enemy?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"One who had hunted the prairies over to find him; one who had prayed to cross his path for years, killed him."

"Some one he had wronged?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"Some one who had wronged him."

"Old man, you speak in riddles; tell me who was the foe that killed Merton Mabrey?"

"I say he was no foe, but one who loved him, one who had wronged him in the past, and who had long sought him to beg him to forgive and forget."

"And who was that one?"

"It was one who held him in his arms when he was a wee baby, who took care of him in his early boyhood, was proud of him as he grew to manhood, and, oh God! has now laid him in his grave."

"Ay, young man, I, Merton Mabrey's father, took the life of my poor boy; yes, shot him down on the spot beneath which he now lies."

With a groan of anguish the old man sunk down upon the ground, seemingly overcome by his feelings, while Iron Arm stood gazing in horror upon him.

Then, from some sudden impulse he sprang forward and began once more to throw the earth out of the grave.

Soon the hand, from which the ruby ring had been taken, was revealed, and then came the outline of the form.

Seizing it, Lucien De Leon dragged it out of its clayey bed, and then, as the sunken face was revealed, shouted in ringing tones:

"See! old man, this is not Merton Mabrey! not your son!"

A wild shriek of joy, and the old man sprang to his feet and then fell insensible into the open grave.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN INHOSPITABLE RECEPTION.

ALTHOUGH Grizzly Gabe and his two pards got off scot-free from the Texans, where they had expected trouble, from being recognized as in the crowd the night before that was antagonistic to Iron Arm, they did not feel wholly at ease, and it was decided that they would, for the present, give up the search for Flash, carrying bound to his back the body of his dead master, and endeavor to kidnap Arta from the ranch of Harvey Preston, where they believed she had gone to live.

"Sides, pards, a horse loose on ther pararer are as likely ter be in one part as another, an' we may run across ther body bein' toted round, an' perhaps we mout strike ther f'other chap as that leetle devil wants dead or alive," remarked Grizzly Gabe, as he headed for the crossing of the North Platte, with a view to make for the Preston ranch or its vicinity.

"What a leetle devil that feller be, Gabe; seems ter me thar a all-fired quantity o' evil in his hide, fer one so young and so small," remarked Hank.

"Thar are indeed, pards; but as he hes got ther rocks, he are a prime feller ter do innercent leetle jobs fer, and I intends ter freeze ter him," put in Bedrock Mose.

"He looks as though he could 'rastle a keerd to the queen's taste," suggested Grizzly.

"So he do, an' somebody as picks him up fer a tenderfoot will find he hev got horns."

"You is right, Mose," remarked Hank, and thus discussing the merits and demerits of Tiny Tim the party rode on their way until noon, when they camped for awhile to rest.

Before them, stretched out on the prairie, they saw the tired and gaunt Texas herd, with still enough cowboys remaining in charge of them to protect them from cattle-thieves.

"Thar w'd be a fine haul fer us, pards, ef it wasn't fer them wild mustangers," remarked Grizzly Gabe, wistfully eying the cattle.

"Yas, Gabe, an' when they gets to ther ranch on ther Dismal, which this Texas ranchero hev homesteaded, we'll hev a sample o' them hides."

"Yas, ef them Texas fellers goes back home; ef they locates heur, Hank, our biz are goin' ter git dull," dolefully replied Bedrock Mose.

"Let's side round ther herd, pards, fer ef we keeps close comp'ny we mout be mistook fer cattle-thieves, an' them mustangers hes a way, I've heerd tell, of shootin' a feller fust an' then tryin' ter find out what he hev did ter git shoot- ed, and I doesn't want no sich inquest held over my loved form."

This opinion of Grizzly Gabe seemed to meet with approbation, and bearing to the right, the party went up through a canyon between a range of high sand-hills, and were glad that they were no longer under the espionage of the mustangers, who watched them closely until they were out of sight.

Hiding until late at night, they went into a dry camp, and at dawn mounted and continued their way once more, soon after coming in sight of the Preston ranch.

"Thet durned feller do take comfort to his- self, ef he do be in ther pararer," remarked Grizzly Gabe, as he observed the comfortable cabins which comprised the Preston ranch.

"He do indeed; but, Gabe, what's ter be did now?" asked Mose.

"Waal, we'll ride up to ther ranch ter ask ef ther Iron Arm are thar, an' say we has been sent by Dave Perry ter look fer him, an' this will give us a look at ther place an' ther surroundin's, an' how many thar are ter tackle, ef it comes ter a muss."

"Yer'll not take ther gal ter-day?"

"Oh, no, I isn't no durned fool ef I does look it; we does our dark deeds at night; yer see, we is not got ter be suspected in this biz, but ther Injuns hes."

"Thar hain't no prowlin' red-skins this side o' ther Bad Lands, or ther Big Cheyenne, as would dare do it, on account o' ther sogers," said Hank.

"Waal, sogers knows Injuns is Injuns, an' ef thar is deviltry done they lays it on 'em, an' ef we looks like Injuns, talks like Injuns, an' acts like Injuns, why we is Injuns, an' ther sogers will go up to ther Sioux villages an' raise partickler fits."

"Thet are so, Gabe, but whar is we ter git ther Injun fixin's?"

"At ther lay-out on ther Loup, an' then come back; but, now look pious, fer I see a feller lookin' at us as ef he didn't think we was mis- sionaries."

The "feller" referred to by Grizzly Gabe was Sancho the Mexican, and he was alone at the ranch, for after an early breakfast Ramsey Preston had ridden over to the Birdwood with his cousins, to install them in their new home.

"Well, señors, what is it?" asked Sancho, as the trio rode up to the ranch door.

"A cup of water first, pard, and then we'd like ter know ef yer hev seen ther Texan they calls Iron Arm, the Ranchero?" answered Grizzly Gabe, in his politest way, which, at the best, was bad enough.

"There is the pump and a cup; help your- selves, señors; as to the one you speak of, I only

last night heard of him, and have not seen him."

"He are lost; gone astray, an' Dave Perry, the howlin' justice o' Platte, sent us ter see ef we c'd find him."

"He is not here."

"Is not this ther ranch o' Mr. Preston, fer I knows his'n lies in this locality?"

"It is."

"Are he at home?"

"No."

"Away from home?"

"Yes."

"He were in Platte yesterday."

"Yes."

"I've got some hoofs I'd like ter sell him."

"He does not wish to buy."

"These are prime critters."

"He does not wish them."

"They is Texas cattle."

"No."

"Ef I c'd see him maybe, he—"

"I say no, señor."

"Waal, you ought ter know, fer yer looks like a knowin' cuss; but all ther same I w'd like ter see ther boss."

"He is at the Birdwood ranch."

"Thankee fer nothin'; good-day," and Griz- zly Gabe rode away, followed by his pards, and all of them were profuse in their oaths against Sancho.

"To ther Birdwood we go, pards, an' durned ef I don't believe we kin do a stroke o' biz thar," and having suddenly formed some plan in his mind, Gabe led the way toward the Birdwood, for he knew well where was the other ranch of Ramsey Preston.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GRIZZLY GABE CATCHES A TARTAR.

"BEDROCK MOSE, does yer think yer kin smooth ther devil out o' yer face sufficient ter play honest?" and Grizzly Gabe halted, when within a mile of Birdwood ranch, and turned to Mose, who replied:

"I kin try, Gabe."

"Waal, you is not known ter ther gang in ther ranch as hevin' been in my comp'ny last night, an' I wishes yer ter go up thar an' say yer is a scout, carrying dispatches from Fort Randall ter Fort McPherson, an' hes got chased off yer way by Injuns an' is lost."

"Waal?"

"Now heur is a dozen diff'rent trails, an' you jist ax ranchero Preston ter come heur an' set yer on ther right one, an' Hank must be heur ter cover him."

"Waal?"

"He hev got plenty o' money I know, an' we kin make him pan out rich, or make wolf-meat out of him."

"Waal, Gabe?"

"I will sneak up to ther ranch an' do a leetle biz, fer I'll git ther gal, an' knock her daddy over with a bullit."

"Thet are prime; but do I look like a healthy scout, Gabe?" said Bedrock Mose, with rueful countenance.

"Waal, you isn't han'some, like Buffalo Bill at Fort McPherson be, an' a gazelle are more gracefuller than you be, Mose; but yer'll do fer a scout, seein' as yer is a most noble liar, so spruce up, an' go 'long, an' you, Hank, jist stan' heur an' get ther drop on ther cattle man."

There was little more talk, for the villains understood each other thoroughly, and while Hank Lazarus took up his position in the timber fringing the Birdwood, Bedrock Mose went on his way to the ranch, and Grizzly Gabe dogged his steps to seek a chance to act his part.

Boldly riding up to the cabin, which was picturesquely situated upon the pretty Birdwood, Bedrock Mose saw three persons seated in front of the door, one of whom he recognized as Ramsey Preston, the Ranchero, for he had seen him in North Platte on several occasions.

Saluting politely, and quickly, for he saw that the ranchero dropped his hand upon his revolver, he said:

"Prairie pard, I am off ther trail, havin' been chased by Injuns, an' want to find Fort McPherson, for I carries dispatches from Fort Randall."

"By going up the river a mile you can strike the direct trail," said Ramsey Preston.

"I was up thar, an' seems as ef thar were a trail leadin' everywhar; wish yer'd oblige me, pard, by settin' me right."

It was a request that Ramsey Preston could not refuse, and rising, he walked toward his horse, that was lariatied near, the saddle upon him.

"I will keep on to my ranch, Berkley, but will ride over to-morrow," he called out.

"Stay and take supper with us," asked Arta, with forced politeness.

"No, I wish to get home by dark, for I have no desire to see the Phantom Mazeppa again, I frankly confess," and so saying he threw him- self into the saddle, and followed by the pre- tended scout rode up the river.

"Arta, when I went after my runaway horse I saw some antelopes, so I'll take my rifle and try and bring one in for supper," said Berkley Preston, as soon as his cousin had gone.

"Don't be long away, father," said Arta, and entering the cabin she hurried herself about setting her new home to rights; but while she worked diligently her thoughts seemed far away.

"What! back so soon, father?" she suddenly cried, as a form darkened the doorway.

"Yas, I are heur, leetle girl, an' you is a putty one, too," and Grizzly Gabe stepped into the cabin, and gazed with insolent admiration upon the beautiful girl, for she was now no longer in male attire, but dressed in a most be- coming Mexican suit, which Ramsey Preston had told her was one of his lost Alita's dresses.

At sight of the cruel-faced intruder Arta turned deadly pale, yet did not lose her pre- sence of mind, though she recognized the man whom she had last seen in the saloon of the Overland Rest.

"Well, sir, what want you here?" she asked, with all the coolness she could command.

"I wants you, leetle gal, fer yer is worth su'thin' ter me, yer is."

"Leave this cabin, or I will call for aid."

"Yer kin call, leetle gal, but it won't fetch, fer yer coz, ther ranchero, hev gone up ther river, an' by this time are the prisoner o' my pards, an' yer daddy hev gone down-stream, arter game fer supper, I guesses."

"Then I shall have to protect myself from you, as I would from a wild beast," was the fearless reply.

"Lordy, leetle gal, yer hes pluck, but it hain't goin' ter do yer no good."

Arta made no reply, but her eyes flashed, and then suddenly she glanced to one side of the desperado out of the open door, and cried fervently:

"Father! thank God you have come!"

Grizzly Gabe turned quickly, his hand upon his pistol butt, and that instant, with a bound, Arta was by his side, the weapon was knocked to the floor, and her own revolver, which she had in her sash, was leveled at the face of the desperado, while she said sternly:

"Now, sir, the tables are turned, and you are my prisoner."

Grizzly Gabe turned pallid, for he saw that in the face of the maiden that told him she would kill him, and the revolver she held was no toy weapon, but cocked and ready for use, and he dared not move, for her hand was as firm as a rock.

"Leetle gal," he said, in a whining way, and with a sickly smile, "I were jokin'."

"I am not."

"I comed heur ter do yer a favor."

"If you do not do as I direct I will do the country a favor by killing you."

"Lordy! don't be so keerless with thet w- pin; it mout go off."

"What if it does? it will only kill a brute."

"Holy Rockies, yer is a tough one; let's see ef we can't compromise."

"No compromise; I mean business."

"Yer look it," and Grizzly Gabe was watch- ing for some chance to catch her off her guard; but she seemed to understand this, and said, sternly:

"Hold up your hands, sir!"

"I hes ther roometiz, an' I can't do it, leetle gal."

"Rum-it-tis, more likely," and Arta was as- tonished at her own courage in making a pun at such a time.

"Up with your hands, sir, high above your head."

"Doctors says 'tain't healthy."

"The doctors will say you died of a bullet- wound if you do not obey."

"Rocky-ghany Mountains, gal, but you is wuss nor a Texas steer."

"Did you hear me?"

"Yas; my hands is up."

She stepped back a pace or two, and took from where it hung on the wall, a lariat, and still covering the villain with one hand, she arranged the noose with the other.

"Lordy! she are goin' ter hang me."

As Grizzly Gabe spoke the lariat was skill- fully thrown, the noose settling down around his waist, and being at once drawn taut by Arta, who ordered:

"Lower one hand, sir!"

With a muttered oath the desperado obeyed, and the rope was then thrown around the neck, brought down around one arm, pinioning it to the waist, and still kept taut.

"Now the other hand, sir!"

"Leetle gal, let up on a feller," whined Griz- zly Gabe.

"Obey," was the stern response, and the second arm was pinioned in the same way.

"Now lie down upon your face, sir."

"I'm durned ef I do!"

"Then I shall shoot you as I would a wolf."

"Yer hasn't ther sand."

Her answer was to touch the trigger and the bullet scraped his scalp; but the pistol still covered him, and her cool tones showed she was in earnest.

"Next time, I'll send the bullet through your brain; you see I am accustomed to fire-arms."

"Durned ef yer hain't; yer tells me ter lie down!" and it was evident that Grizzly Gabe was badly frightened.

"Yes."

"Down I goes," and down the fellow went, at the same time making an effort to get his hand on his revolvers.

But the lariat held his arms fast, and as he fell, springing nimbly forward, Arta bent over and disarmed him.

"Now, I guess you'll keep until papa comes home," and seizing another lariat, she bound the villain as securely as though he had been in iron fetters.

But hardly had she completed her task, when a voice was heard outside.

It was Bedrock Mose, and he said:

"We has did our work prime, pard Gabe; how is yours been did?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A COWARD'S CRIME.

At the strange voice outside the cabin Arta started, and at once wheeled on the defensive.

But in an instant her presence of mind came back to her, and springing to the window she glanced quickly out, while she made a hurried gesture that Grizzly Gabe well understood meant for him death if he replied.

What she saw outside did not fill her with delight, for upon his own horse sat her cousin, Ramsey Preston, his feet bound to the stirrups, and his hands securely fastened to the horn of the saddle, while upon either side of him was a captor.

In spite of the odds against her, Arta decided upon bold action, and springing back to the side of her prisoner she whispered sternly:

"Call one by name and tell him you are tying me, and bid him ride up the river in search of my father; the other, tell to come in here and aid you."

The muzzle of the revolver was pressed hard against the temple of the desperado as she spoke, her finger was upon the trigger and the weapon was cocked.

"If you hesitate you die," she said, hoarsely.

Now Grizzly Gabe was a man who in misery loved company, and having been himself captured so cleverly by a young girl, he was but too anxious to draw his companions into the trap, and he sung out lustily:

"Oh! my work has been done prime too, fer I has ther gal heur; but you, Bedrock, ride up ther river arter ther old man, fer he's gone ther way afoot, an' you, Hank, jist hitch ther horses, an' come in heur, fer this leetle gal hev got claws, an' I needs yer."

Breathlessly Arta awaited, and her heart gave a great bound of joy when she heard one of the villains dash away, and knew that the other was tying the horses to a post near by.

A moment more and Hank Lazarus stepped unhesitatingly into the cabin, and, with all the strength she could muster, Arta brought the barrel of her pistol down upon his head, and, not knowing from whence came the blow, or who dealt it, he sunk in a heap on the floor.

Then, to secure a rope and bind him was the work of an instant, while Grizzly Gabe growled:

"Waal, ef yer hain't ther boss gal I'll chaw coyote."

Inheeding his remark Arta glanced out of the door, and seeing that Bedrock Mose was out of sight, she glided up to the horse upon which Ramsey Preston sat in no enviable humor.

"Arta! what means this?" he asked, with surprise, for he deemed her a prisoner.

"It means that the Grizzly got his claws cut, caught a Tartar, cousin Ramsey, for I captured him, and jist now knocked his comrade down as he entered the cabin, but I hope I have not killed him, for I want no life, however vile, upon my hands," said the spirited girl, hurriedly, while she was deftly releasing him of his bonds.

"What! have you done this?"

"Yes."

"And your father?"

"Went down the river jist after you left."

"Down you say?"

"Yes."

"Then that fellow will—"

"Not meet him, for I forced the Grizzly to send his brother villain up the river."

"You are a marvelous girl, and—"

"And you are free; now come into the cabin and we will capture the other one, for there seem to be but three."

"There are but three; and one, you say, is the man known as Grizzly Gabe?"

"Yes."

"He is the worst desperado on the border I have heard."

"He is as gentle as a dove now."

"Dead?"

"Oh, no; did you not hear him call out to his companions?"

"I did."

"Well, I forced him to do so; come in now."

Ramsey Preston shook himself, as though to feel that he was himself once more, and followed Arta into the cabin.

"Please see if he is dead, cousin Preston, for I struck him pretty hard," she said, anxiously. The ranchero bent over the prostrate form and said, slowly:

"No, he was merely stunned, for he is conscious now; you did not kill him, but I will."

He placed a pistol over the heart of Hank as he spoke and pulled the trigger.

There was a suppressed groan for mercy, a smothered report, a yell from Grizzly Gabe and a fierce cry from Arta Preston, while she sprung in front of her cousin, her form drawn to its full height, her face white, and eyes flashing, and said:

"How dare you do such a cowardly deed as that, Ramsey Preston, murderer, assassin, that you are."

"Arta, hold! and—"

"Not one word, coward; you are not worthy the name of man."

"Girl, beware, I will not brook such words from you," he said, savagely.

"I defy you, sir, and cry shame, everlasting shame upon such an act as the one you are guilty of."

"Arta, are you mad? Hear me! That man entrapped me, threw a lasso around my neck and jerked me off my horse, and with his comrade, threw himself upon me and bound me like a slave."

"Yonder wretch meant you some fearful wrong, and such monsters are to be dealt with, not as human beings, but as mad wolves, and, remembering their deeds, and what we would have suffered but for your bravery, I lost self-control and killed the wretch."

He spoke earnestly, entreatingly, and met the burning eyes of the shocked and indignant maiden without flinching.

She remained silent, but Grizzly Gabe, who had been horrified by the act of the ranchero, seeing that he would not be murdered, if his beautiful captor could prevent, said aloud:

"Thet are as howlin' a lie as ever jaw wagged; he kilt poor pard Hank because he loved the smell o' blood, and—"

Grizzly suddenly cut his sentence off, as the ranchero turned upon him, but was checked by Arta, who said:

"Do not add another crime to the other, cousin Ramsey, by killing a bound man, and, as for your last act, all I can say is the remembrance of it will be your punishment."

"You forgive me, then?" he asked, in his earnest way.

"It is not for me to forgive, and I can never forget it; but we will not speak of it more," she coldly replied, and then said, quickly:

"Hark!"

The sound of hoof-strokes were distinctly heard outside, and Arta glanced from the window.

"It is their comrade; stand there, cousin Ramsey, and cover him with your pistol, but remember, do not fire unless he resists, and you, sir, call to him to come in, for your prisoner is in here."

With the pistol-muzzle again against his heart, Grizzly Gabe cheerfully obeyed, and, as Bedrock Mose halted outside, called out:

"Is thot you, Mose?"

"It are."

"Got the old man?"

"Nary."

"Come in, fer thar is a circus in heur, an' yer isn't charged nuthin' ter see ther show."

"I are with yer," answered Bedrock Mose, and he sprung to the ground and entered the cabin.

"Move, and you die!"

There was no mistaking the words, and Mose saw that his former prisoner now held the drop on him, while Grizzly Gabe was lying on the floor bound hand and foot.

"I am a lamb fer quietude, pard," he answered, with the stoical indifference of the real borderman.

"Hands up!"

"Jist see me h'ist 'em," and up they went.

"Now, Arta, we will tie this villain," said Ramsey Preston, and the prisoner was quickly and skillfully secured, just as Berkley Preston entered, an antelope on his shoulders, and started back in surprise at what he saw.

In a word Arta told all, and Grizzly Gabe put in:

"Thet leetle gal are ther boss, pard, an' we is tuk in han'some; mout I inquire what is ter he did with us?"

"I will start for Platte to-night and take you there to put in jail, and if the justice don't hang you the Regulators will," said Ramsey Preston.

"Bedrock, thet are durned bad fer us," said Grizzly Gabe, dolefully; but he did not feel hopeless, for he knew that if not lynched at once, the jail would not hold him over night, and Bedrock Mose had the same opinion.

Half an hour after Ramsey Preston started on his way to North Platte, intending to stop for the night at his own ranch, and he carried with him the two prisoners, securely bound upon their horses, and father and daughter were alone in their new prairie home, which, in spite of its loneliness, was a haven of rest after all the dangers and vicissitudes they had known.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OLD MAN'S STORY.

I WILL now return to Lucien De Leon, the ranchero, after his two startling discoveries,

that the grave in the cottonwoods held not the body of Merton Mabrey, and that the man by his side confessed to having killed that personage, who was his own son.

Feeling that the old man was demented, and pitying him deeply, Iron Arm, without another look at the decomposing corpse he had taken from the grave, hastily raised the insensible form in his arms and bore him to the spring not far away.

There, after dashing water in his face, he soon brought him back to consciousness.

For a moment the old man did not seem to recall the circumstances that had passed; but after rubbing his hand several times across his brow, he asked, earnestly:

"Was that the body of my son?"

"You mean Merton Mabrey?"

"Yes."

"It was not."

"Who is it?"

"The face is wholly unknown to me."

"You say you know my son?"

"Well."

"There can be no mistake?"

"None."

"You are sure?"

"You can look at the corpse and satisfy yourself."

"That would do no good."

"You would then recognize it if it was your son."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have not seen him since he grew up to manhood."

"What?"

"I mean it; he was eighteen when we parted."

"He must be fully twenty-eight now."

"That is just his age."

"And ten years ago you parted with him?"

"Yes; shall I tell you why?"

"If you wish to; but not if it will cause you pain," answered Iron Arm, feelingly.

"I told you that I had killed, as I believed, my boy, and through you I found out that I had not, and I will tell you why my son and I parted ten long years ago."

"I was a rich man then, and am now, yet what care I for riches?"

"I was a fool then, an old fool, for I fell in love with a young and beautiful girl."

"I believed that she loved my son, Merton, and that he loved her; but I looked upon their affection as childish, and fascinated with the girl, for she was but sixteen, I begged her to marry me; nay, I almost forced her to do so, for I was her guardian and controlled her small fortune left her by her parents."

"Some months after our marriage I was taken very ill, and the physician said I was poisoned."

"It was a rare and deadly poison that had been put into a glass of wine I had taken before retiring, and Merton brought me that wine, and in his private desk was found some of the same kind of poison used to end my life, and some had been taken out of the paper."

"I at once had an interview with Merton, accused him of attempting to kill me that he might inherit my fortune and marry my widow."

"He was furious, as I believed then he feigned it, and told me that he hated the woman instead of loving her."

"But I would listen to nothing, called him an assassin, and drove him from my house, and to this day I have not seen him."

"Poor boy, I learned he was going down hill to the devil, that he wronged a young girl who trusted in his love, and finding it out, she committed suicide, and many other things I heard against my poor son."

At last my young wife dishonored my name and fled from my home with another, and I went abroad a heart-broken man."

"Returning to my deserted home, I arrived jist in time to see my housekeeper die."

"She was a woman I had always trusted, and imagine my horror when she confessed to me that she had aided my wife to ruin my son, that, after my death, my widow might enjoy my riches."

"My wife's reason was that Merton had scorned her love and she hated him for it as bitterly as it was her nature to hate."

"Yes, young man, from that dying woman's lips I found out how innocent my boy had been, how I had wronged him, and how criminal had been my wife and her confederate in guilt."

"From that day I sought to find my boy; but he had been a sad wanderer, and I could not get tidings of his whereabouts, though I did discover that he had been deeply wronged in one of the charges made against him, for he had been secretly married to the maiden he was said to have basely deceived."

"What! do you mean this?" asked Iron Arm, with sudden and intense interest.

"I do."

"What was the name of the maiden?" he quickly asked.

"Clarice Cordova."

"Ah!"

With this single exclamation Lucien De Leon sprung to his feet and rapidly paced to and fro, until the old man asked him:

"Did you know her?"

"Yes."

"And you believed her wronged by my son?"

"Yes."

"She was not."

"How know you this?"

"From one who gave into my hands her diary."

"Poor girl, she loved the boy to idolatry, and when one, who professed to know him well went to her and told her that he had deceived her, for he was already married, and showed to her a certificate of marriage, with her name and that of Merton Mabrey, she cared not to live, and without one word of reproach took her own life."

"Old man, thank you for those words, for you have said that Merton Mabrey did not deceive Clarice Cordova."

"No, for the woman who told this lie to his young bride was my dishonored wife, and the certificate was one of my marriage to her."

A strange look flashed over the face of Lucien De Leon, and for some time he remained in deep thought, his brow clouded, his lips sternly set, and it was evident that the old man's story recalled from the bygone some scene in his own life of deepest interest.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MYSTERIOUS TRAIL TO FOLLOW.

AFTER some seconds of this seemingly painful meditation, Lucien De Leon came to a halt and said, abruptly:

"Go on with your story, old man."

"You are interested in it?"

"Deeply."

"Ah me, it has been one of deepest interest to me."

"Well, I at last found that my son had gone to the prairies, after his wife's death, and there I sought him."

"I heard of him here and there in Texas as a wild, dissipated, reckless young devil, yet never could I find him, and at last they told me he was dead."

"Sick of civilization, caring little for life, I roamed the prairies with my horse and rifle, and expected to die there, until one day I met a young man in a border town whose face seemed strangely familiar to me."

"Hearing my name he told me that my son was not dead, but had gone to the northern plains, and that he was going to follow him there soon, as they were boon companions."

"This gave me renewed hope, and I joined a band of cattle men going north, intending to meet my informer and my son at a given place on the Republican."

"The party I was with crossed the river at Beaver Creek, but I left them there and came on alone up the stream to Rock Creek, my place of rendezvous with my young friend."

"There I camped alone for some two weeks, and one day up rode my young friend and he was alone."

"And a sad story he told me too, for he said my son had been recently killed, shot down in cold blood by one of the members of the train, but, if I wished to avenge his death, he would lead me to where I could meet the assassin."

"Young man, you can imagine that, in my frame of mind, I longed to meet the one who had killed my son, and I went with the one I believed to be the friend of my boy, and it was to this place he brought me."

"And yonder, in that thicket I crouched, awaiting the coming of the assassin, while my son's pretended friend described the man and his horse to me so that I would not fail to know him, and said he would go back to the train and send him, under some excuse, to this piece of timber."

"I intended to give the man a chance for his life; but when I saw him coming across the prairie, and remembered the story told me, of how cowardly he had assassinated my poor boy, I held no mercy, my rifle covered his heart, as he came slowly into the timber, and I touched the trigger."

"He fell dead from his horse, and I intended to leave him to the coyotes for food: but my heart revolted at this, and I gave him decent burial, tied his horse to a stake at his grave, and mounting my own mustang left the hated spot."

"The next day I struck the trail of a train, and joining it, to my surprise and horror found that it was the one to which my son and his false friend had belonged, and that Merton had not been killed as reported, but neither he, nor his friend, had been seen for two days."

"And more, it was then that I discovered that the man on the blood-bay, and dressed as I described, was not the murderer of my boy, but my son himself."

"In bitter anguish I haunted this place, believing I mourned by Merton's grave, and hoping against hope that the man who led me to commit murder would come this way again, and the angels in heaven could not save him from my just vengeance."

"Was the one who professed to be your son's friend a small man, with a handsome, strongly-marked face?" asked Iron Arm.

"He was, and dressed like a city dandy; do you know him?"

"I have met him," was the evasive reply. "After you killed this man, whom you believed to be your son's murderer, did you notice if he wore any jewelry?"

"Yes, a handsome ruby ring was on his little finger."

"Had he other jewelry?"

"I did not notice, for I cared only for his life to satiate my revenge."

"I noticed, I think, that he wore a watch: I will bring it here," and walking over to where the corpse lay Iron Arm took from it a watch and chain, and then, after regarding the face and form attentively, returned to the father, who had closely watched his movements.

"This is your son's watch, sir, for I remember it; but the dead man, I'll take oath, is not Merton Mabrey."

"Thank God for that."

"So say I, sir."

"But where is my son?"

"That were hard to tell."

"He must be dead."

"Why do you think so?"

"This man that I shot had on him his ring and watch."

"True."

"Then my son is dead."

"No, for I am confident now that I saw him two nights ago."

"Saw my son?"

"Yes, Mr. Mabrey, and I will find him for you, and solve this strange mystery."

"God bless you for those words, young man."

"And more, I will find his false friend; where is your horse?"

"In the old stockade fort in the other end of the timber."

"Get him while I reburied that body, and then go with me," said Iron Arm, quietly.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DANDY SPORT.

THE presence of Tiny Tim in North Platte seemed to create considerable interest, as he was a different-looking personage from those who went to make up the population of that, at the time of which I write, crude frontier settlement.

Tiny Tim, as far as the tiny was concerned, seemed to suit the young man for a prefix to his cognomen, and the mass of Plattites did not care whether his name was Tim or Jim.

But to come to that place and not be rebaptized was something that was not to be thought of, and a score of new names were bestowed upon the young man, one of which seemed to suit him better than all else.

That name was the Dandy Sport. It was given him by a six-foot villain who had seen him "sling pasteboard" as he expressed it, and which, being interpreted, means play-cards, and had lost through the skill of the young gentleman.

After a couple of days passed in getting acquainted with the citizens and the place, and somewhat anxiously glancing out over the prairie toward the distant rivers, the North and South Platte, that run on either side of the town, Tiny Tim, or otherwise the Dandy Sport, went to the Overland Rest as soon as the shadows of night began to fall, as he had done on the previous evening.

Here had congregated all the grandees, card-players, scouts, cowboys and loafers in general for gambling, gossip and guzzling liquors, and the Dandy Sport secured a table for himself and soon heard the news that was flying about from tongue to tongue.

First he learned that the mustangers, enraged at the mysterious and supposed death of their leader, Iron Arm, had divided into quartettes, and gone on a thorough search for him, or for those who had dealt foully with him.

Next, he learned that a party of young bloods from the East had arrived in town that day, intending to go on a hunt on the plains, and that they were expected to look in on the Overland seemed to gratify him exceedingly.

Hardly had the Dandy Sport turned these morsels of information over in his mind, when the door opened and in sprang a pallid citizen, with three words breaking from his lips:

"The Phantom Mazeppa."

Instantly the room was a scene of dire confusion.

Some men sprang for the door, others uttered curses, and still more kept their seats, yet all seemed impressed.

Among those who started for the door was Dave Perry and the Dandy Sport, and they arrived in time to see a snowy object go by like the wind, and to hear the wild, mocking laughter that broke from the lips of the mad rider, that keen eyes saw was still bound full length upon the back of the flying animal.

Awe-struck and wondering the Dandy Sport looked at Dave Perry, and Dave looked at him; but this mutual looking gave them no solution to the weird mystery, and they returned in doors, and, to banish disagreeable thoughts, Tiny Tim proposed a drink all round at his expense, and there was not a single refusal.

Enlivened by the ardent spirit, the spectral

spirit gradually faded from the minds of Dave's guests, and clouds of tobacco smoke rose indolently above groups of card-players, who in the exciting games of chance had forgotten almost the existence of the Phantom Mazeppa.

But again came an interruption, though not of a weird nature, for in stalked Ramsey Preston, and upon either side of him was a prisoner, bound securely.

One glance was sufficient to recognize Grizzly Gabe and his pard, Bedrock Mose.

At once a hum of excitement went round, and Gospel Luke, who was sipping free bitters at Dave Perry's expense, sung out:

"Alas! brothers in iniquity, I urged you not to go the thorny path, but to remain with me."

"You is a durned yelpin' liar, Gospel Luke, fer yer begged ter go with us, an' I wishes yer hed done so, an' were whar poor Hank Lazarus are now," cried Grizzly Gabe, angrily, as his captor forced his way through the crowd to the table where Dave Perry sat, and which was next to the Dandy Sport.

"Been hunting, Mr. Preston?" asked Dave, as the cattle king approached.

"Yes, and I bagged some game, as you see, Perry," answered Ramsey Preston.

"Been throat-cutting, or cattle-stealing, Grizzly?" asked Dave, in a nonchalant manner.

"We hain't been doin' nothin', pard Perry; this are a put-up racket on us, ter pay tack fer t'other night, fer we is as innercent as lambs," answered Grizzly Gabe, in a hurt tone.

"Yes, you look it; do you make a charge against them, Mr. Preston?"

"Yes; they came to the ranch on the Birdwood, where my cousin has made his home, and endeavored to take my life and that of Berkeley Preston, and also to kidnap his daughter, Alta."

"Indeed?" and Dave's scowl meant daggers.

"It is true, Perry; but they were thwarted by the nerve and pluck of my fair cousin, and lost one of their number, and these two worthies I have brought to you."

"I guess their trial won't take long," significantly said Dave Perry.

"String 'em up!" cried a voice, and it was evident that the crowd seemed to think this the best decision to come to; but Dave Perry summoned Ben Fanshaw, the constable, and gave him orders to guard the prisoners to jail and hold them safely.

The constable quickly organized a posse to aid him, and among the first volunteers was the Dandy Sport, who placed himself alongside of Grizzly Gabe, who whispered:

"Yer must save us, Leetle Tiny, or I'll tell on yer, durned ef I don't."

Tiny Tim turned very pale, but said, calmly:

"Would you turn traitor?"

"My neck are worth suthin' ter me, boy, an' I'll squeal ther whole racket ef yer don't save us."

"How can I?"

"Yer hes gold?"

"Yes."

"Jail-keepers hes pockets, hain't they?"

"Yes."

"Then work yer dust, an' don't yer lose no time, fer this are a onhealthy kentry fer suddint deaths."

"I understand you, and my money shall flow freely to save you."

"Ter save yersef, yer mean; but we won't quarrel on thet, so as I gits away."

"Heur are the jail, an' it hain't a palace, so I don't keer ter stay long."

"If money will not buy your liberty?"

"Then git my gang an' tip this heur durned shanty over, an' me an' my pard won't tarry ter see it sot upon end ag'in."

"All right; I will save you," and the Dandy Sport returned to the Overland Rest, where he found some strangers had arrived during his absence.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DANDY SPORT MAKES A BET.

THE strangers whom Dandy Sport, as all seemed to unite in calling Tiny Tim, found at the Overland Rest upon his return from the jail, were the young hunters from the East.

There was a party of six of them, all dressed in hunting costume, and looking like men who were fond of sport, and willing to take risks to find it.

Open-handed, dropping their Eastern affectations of speech and manner while West, and willing to take things as they found them beyond the limits of civilization, ever ready to set up the drinks, play a game of cards, sing a song or join in a racket, they at once became popular in North Platte, and the Dandy Sport found them hail fellows well met with the boys upon his return.

Their leader, and the one who had gotten up the hunting party, was a young man who owned a cattle ranch and considerable herd near Kearney, and had twice been on the plains before.

With Buffalo Bill as his guide and prairie tutor he had learned wisdom, and consequently had avoided the misfortune of having himself made a target of by some hot-headed frontiers-

man, or losing his scalp to decorate an Indian lodge-pole.

True he had had one lesson, and profited by it, for experience was his teacher on that occasion.

It was upon his first visit, and he had been asked to take a drink by some new-found friends, all rough Lordermen.

The "bar" was a shanty, sheltering a plank on two barrels, and behind these were the bartender and demijohns.

The former was an old settler, a returned Californian of '49—that is, returned that far eastward—and he was a walking arsenal.

"What'll you hev, Slicky?" he asked the young Easterner.

All had said "whisky straight," knowing that the question as to their likes was merely a form, and that there was but one liquor to be had.

"A little pale sherry," was the innocent reply of the young man.

"Pale thunder and lightning! you'll take whisky straight, and drink it out o' thet tin cup, or thar'll be weepin' in Babylon fer a lost lamb."

Such was the reply of the bartender, and as he accompanied his remarks by presenting a revolver, the Easterner took his whisky straight, and out of a tin cup, too.

Profiting by his experience upon his first trip to the plains, the others of the hunting party took things as they found them, and were voted by the natives "durned good gerloots fer tenderfeet."

And this young leader of the hunters the reader has met before, for it was none other than Carter Conrad, the young aristocrat from Boston, who had insulted Arta Preston, when she sung before the club windows, and who had challenged Lucien De Leon for punishing the insult.

And it was upon Carter Conrad that the eyes of the Dandy Sport fell, when he reentered the Overland Rest, and crossing to where he sat he listened to the conversation of the party, and overheard the remark of the Bostonian:

"No horse can overtake the Phantom Mazeppa, you say?"

"None has yet been able to do so, though I have heard that a number have given chase," responded Dave Perry.

"I guess it is because the rider was not anxious," and there was a slight sneer in the tone of Carter Conrad.

"Some brave men have met the Phantom Mazeppa, given it chase, and yet it has ran away from them," remarked a young officer from Fort McPherson.

"If a brave man, well mounted, wished to run this pretended Specter of the Plains down, he could do so," returned the Bostonian.

Instantly Ramsey Preston, the ranchero, crossed over to the table, and said in his calm way:

"Pardon me, sir, for addressing a stranger, but I overheard your remarks, and I beg to say that no man on these prairies owns a faster horse than I do, that I have yet discovered, and I defy any one to call me other than a brave man."

There was something in the face and bearing of the ranchero that commanded respect, and Carter Conrad answered politely:

"And have you met this Phantom, sir?"

"I have, and on three occasions," was the calm reply.

"Three times?" and a general look of surprise rested upon every face.

"Yes."

"Will you kindly say how near you were to the weird steed?" asked Roscoe Howe, one of the hunters.

"On one occasion within fifty paces."

"And you saw the steed and rider?"

"Distinctly."

"Describe both, please," said Carter Conrad.

"A large, long-bodied white horse, with long flowing mane and tail; a person, seemingly, from appearance and voice, a woman, bound upon his back."

"Indeed! she speaks then?"

"Yes; she has been heard to cry for help, and more often laughs mockingly."

"And did you chase this white steed?"

"Twice I did, and on two occasions I fired upon both horse and rider with both rifle and pistol."

"With what result?"

"None that I could discover."

"When did you last see them?"

"To-night, on my way to the town with two prisoners; he circled round us several times, and then disappeared, coming in this direction."

"And may I ask what is your theory, sir, regarding this strange steed and rider?" persisted Carter Conrad.

"Having urged my horse, that never needs the spur, on in pursuit, with both rowels and knife, and been dropped steadily behind, and fired upon the steed and rider repeatedly, I have but one theory, for I am a dead shot at long and short range."

"Well, sir, your theory is—"

"To avoid the Phantom Mazeppa as something supernatural and not of this earth."

Ramsey Preston said this in a most impressive tone, and wheeling suddenly on his heel walked away.

But, undaunted by all he had heard, Carter Conrad said:

"I'll wager high that I can run down the Phantom Mazeppa, mounted on my racer which I brought out here with me."

"I'll take the bet, sir."

The speaker was the Dandy Sport, and all eyes were turned upon him.

"That I do not run the Mazeppa to earth within the week?" asked the Bostonian.

"Yes."

"Name the sum."

"What you please," was Dandy Sport's indifferent reply.

"Call it, say, two thousand dollars."

"I am willing; here, Mr. Perry, I place my stake in your hand."

"And I do the same, sir," and Carter Conrad also handed over his money to Dave Perry.

"Now, gentlemen, you have heard the bet; come, boys, it is late, so let us go to the hotel," and Carter Conrad and his friends took their departure for the night.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DANDY SPORT'S STRATEGY.

WHEN Dandy Sport bet with Carter Conrad that he could not run the Phantom Mazeppa to earth, he had a motive in putting the stakes in the hands of Dave Perry, for he wished to curry favor with him for a point in view.

After the departure of the hunters for their hotel, the young sport crossed over and sat down by the proprietor of Overland Rest and said, in a casual manner:

"Guess I'll win my bet."

"Think so myself, pard."

"By the way, do you know I think those prisoners whom Ranchero Preston brought in to-night, can tell us more about the Mazeppa than any one else?"

"Why do you think so?" asked Dave.

"Well, I've watched that fellow closely, and he seems to be the only one not surprised at the appearance of the white horse and rider."

"You think he has something to do with it, and that it is a trick to serve some purpose of his own?"

"Yes, Mr. Perry, that is just what I think, and I am willing to buy the secret from him."

"How do you mean?"

"Send for him to come to your private room, and I'll offer him bids for the secret until his cupidity is satisfied."

"What do you gain by this?"

"I'll know what I am betting on, and, if safe, I'll take odds and make a large sum of money."

"Pard, you may be right, and you may be wrong; but if I knew I'd make thousands by it, I'd not take a prisoner out of jail, when he's been intrusted to my keeping."

"There is no danger in it."

"There is, for if the crowd see him, they are just full enough of liquor to have a hanging racket."

"But they won't see him," persisted the sport.

"Well, his gang might, and he'd be rescued, sure; no, I don't like to take chances with other people's property, though I'll risk mine to the last dollar."

Seeing that the honest justice was not to be influenced, Dandy Sport made another strategic move.

Leaving the saloon, after beckoning to several of Grizzly Gabe's companions to follow him, he waited behind a lumber pile.

Here three men soon joined him, and he said, bluntly:

"Pards, you are the Grizzly's friends, I take it."

"Tooth and toe-nail, pard," answered one.

"He's in a scrape."

"Looks that way."

"I wish you to aid me in getting him out."

"Say the word, pard, and we is with yer, ef it's ter chaw glass."

"Do you know where three fast horses can be procured to-night?"

"Fer duckits I kin git anything, day or night."

"Well, here is money, and I wish you to buy two good animals, and have them saddled and bridled, and ready in the lane back of the jail."

"I'll do it," said the man who acted as spokesman.

"Now, where can you buy a snow-white horse?"

Abe Benton's got one I could borrow, fer I knows the ropes, but he wouldn't sell."

"Well, get him and bring him out on the prairie yonder, and I will join you there, and I will tell you what to do."

The men promised obedience, and after a few more instructions they departed on their errands, while Dandy Sport went to his rooms in the hotel.

But he did not remain long, for he returned with a bundle under his arm, and walked quietly out upon the prairie, where he was soon after joined by a man leading a white horse, over whose back was thrown a dark blanket to hide his color.

Opening his bundle, Dandy Sport set to work and soon rigged a kind of harness upon the

horse, and a cord bridle that could not be seen. Then, throwing over his clothes a white sheet, he sprang upon the horse, and, lying down upon his back, held himself securely on by the harness he had skillfully made.

"Now for the jail," he said, and at a word of command the white animal bounded over the prairie.

Guiding him toward the main street he headed him directly for the jail, while he broke forth in peals of mocking laughter that were enough to freeze the blood with horror.

"The Phantom Mazeppa!" arose the cry upon all sides, and men fled from the path of the weird horse and rider.

Up to the gate of the jail he ran, and in terror the keeper, whom Ben Fanshaw had left there on duty, fled from the spot, leaving the prison-pen unguarded.

Then, down from the back of his horse sprang Dandy Sport, the iron bar was unfastened, and he called, quickly:

"Come quick, Grizzly, and make for the prairie; there are horses in the lane at the back of the jail."

"Durn yer, ef yer didn't skeer me out o' my nat'ral growth, fer I tuk yer fer the Phantom Mazip, an'—"

"If you stop to talk you'll be taken! Go!"

"My chin music hev closed; you is a boss, leetle one, an' we'll meet ag'in; good-by, an' excuse haste, fer I hes ter hasten; come, Bedrock."

"Away! away! or all will be lost that has been gained," impatiently said the Dandy Sport, at the same time again springing upon the white horse and placing himself in a recumbent position.

"I is off, pard," and, followed by Bedrock Mose, Grizzly Gabe rushed toward the lane where the horses awaited him, while the Dandy Sport darted away like an arrow from a bow.

As he sped away he saw two horsemen dash out of the lane and a third ride across their path.

"Halt! or I will kill you!" he heard in the stentorian tones of Ben Fanshaw, the jailer.

But the two fugitives did not halt; then followed a pistol shot, and then others, and one man and one horse went down.

The man was Bedrock Mose, shot through the heart, and the horse was the one the constable rode.

But with a rude laugh Grizzly Gabe kept on, and disappeared from sight, while the Dandy Sport dropped from the white horse into the long prairie grass, and said, savagely:

"Curse that man! why did that bullet not kill him, I wonder, for he can make me trouble."

Making a wide circuit, Dandy Sport gained the town, and among the crowd of excited citizens that were inquiring what had really happened, he looked the most innocent.

Suddenly Ben Fanshaw advanced through the throng, and with him was Ramsey Preston, the ranchero, and Dave Perry.

"Pards," said the constable, in a loud tone, addressing the throng in general; "pards, thar hes been o' late some some strange things happenin' in these heur parts, an' ther strangest o' all are ther sarxumstance o' ther Phantom Mazeppa."

"But though thet are a phantom fer a fact, ther one who played her ter-night didn't do it slick enough, an' I know it were a dodge ter git ther cuss Grizzly Gabe an' Bedrock Mose out o' jail, an' it were did, though I tuk ther latter on ther wing, an' he has gone ter climb them golden stairs we reads o' in Scriptur', leastways them reads of who reads Scriptur', fer I isn't pious by rule."

"Now I offers heur, out o' my own dust, one hundred dollars ter know ther gerloot who played Phantom Mazep ter-night, an' ther cattle king heur, Mr. Preston, says he will give five hundred more fer ther same knowledge."

"And I put six hundred on that," broke in Dave Perry.

"Waal, thar is twelve hundred dollars fer ther man as tells who were ther feller as played ghost an' freed ther Grizzly, fer I let Bedrock Mose's spirit out o' jail myself, but did it in ther course o' my bounden duty."

"Now, I know whose were ther horse, but who wants ter make twelve hundred an' tell ther ghost?"

"Pay the money and I will tell."

It was the Dandy Sport who spoke, and a murmur of surprise ran around the crowd and all eyes were fastened upon him.

"Does you know, leetle pard?" asked the constable.

"I do."

"An' yer'll pony up ther knowledge fer ther dust?"

"I will."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right out."

"Here are my one hundred."

"And my five."

"And my six hundred."

The constable handed the money to Tiny Tim, who said, quietly, as he rolled the bills up and pocketed them.

"Grizzly Gabe may be one of the worst men in your town, but I am not one to see a man who has served me go under if I can help it,

and therefore I played the Mazeppa and freed him from jail."

Had a bombshell fallen into the crowd it could not have created a greater momentary excitement, and it was very evident that the majority sympathized with the man who had done so much and played his part so well to serve a friend in trouble.

As for Dave Perry, he laughed lightly, and Ben Fanshaw looked dumfounded; but Ramsey Preston said, sternly:

"You shall answer to me for this, sir, boy though you be, and I'll make you play ghost in earnest."

"All right, Bianca—I beg pardon, I mean Ramsey Preston," was the retort.

But it caused the ranchero to look like a man suddenly struck a severe blow, and in a dazed sort of way he turned to go, and, with a light laugh, the Dandy Sport said:

"Would you see me now, Mr. Preston?"

"Yes."

"Lead, and I follow," and again the Dandy Sport laughed as he followed the cattle king toward his hotel.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CARTER CONRAD ON THE TRAIL.

TRUE to his determination to win his bet, and to run the Phantom Mazeppa to earth, Carter Conrad, the afternoon following his wager, mounted his splendid race-horse, and well armed and equipped for a week's trip set out from North Platte in search of the ghostly steed and mad rider.

Learning from those who professed to best know the nocturnal habits of the Phantom Mazeppa, where he would be most likely to find her, he headed across the north branch of the Platte river and bore away toward the Loup.

Just at dark he came upon a small clump of cottonwoods, and here halted for a rest for his horse and supper.

From this place he could get a wide sweep of the prairie for miles around, and, as soon as the moon rose, he hoped to catch a glimpse of the weird steed and rider.

Whatever the faults of Carter Conrad, as a fast man about town, and persistently hiding his secret marriage from the world, and bringing sorrow upon his beautiful wife, Pauline, who, the reader will remember, prevented his duel with Iron Arm, he certainly could be called a brave man, and, scuttling the idea of the supernatural, was determined for his own satisfaction to solve the mystery attending this nocturnal and ghostly prowler of the prairies.

After watering his horse and staking him out to feed, Carter Conrad partook of his own supper, which was far more luxurious than what a regular plainsman would have enjoyed.

Then, lighting a cigar, he leaned back against a tree and began to muse aloud, for he knew no one was within ear-shot:

"It will be a feather in my cap to run down this pretended phantom that is crazing the superstitious."

"But what can it be, and how strange it is that only at night it is seen."

"Well, I care not, for I shall go for he, she or it wherever I find he, she or it, and if I go under I have but taken my chances."

"Ah me! this quiet prairie scene, with darkness settling over the prairie, no sound being heard save the chirping crickets and that infernally dismal howl from some wolf, sets me to thinking; and I don't like to think, for then, as the poet has it:

"The vision of all my past life
Is an awful thing to face,
Alone with my conscience sitting,
In this solemnly silent place.
For I think of my former actions,
Of the Judgment Day to be;
But sitting alone with my conscience
Seems judgment enough for me."

For a moment he was silent, and then he mused again:

"I wonder what has become of poor Pauline? She was a true and noble little woman, and it was cruel of me to use her as I did."

"But then I loved her when I asked her to be my wife, and thought one day to acknowledge her as such before the world."

"But then the old man has his heart set on my marrying his millionaire chum's daughter, and did he know I had recently married Pauline he would cut me off with a sixpence, for I know the governor intimately, having had experience with his freaks, and he is as firm as the Rock of Ages, to which girls are always clinging in the cheap chromos I have seen."

"Birdie Taff is an awful sweet girl, and I think loves me, and her father is worth a clean two millions, has the gout, and is liable to die at any time, and she is an only child."

"This, with what the governor settles on me, and leaves me when he 'climbs the golden stairs,' and 'puts on the golden slippers,' to 'walk the golden streets,' will give me an income that will support a yacht and a racing stable."

"But there looms up Pauline; I cannot marry Birdie with a wife living, as the law steps in unpleasantly to prevent."

"True, Pauline has left me, and gone, I know not where."

"She never divulged the secret of our marriage, and no one knows it, and in the letter she left when she departed she said she would not betray me."

"But should I marry again, I know her Mexican blood would fire up, and then there would be the deuce to pay."

"If Birdie Taff knew of my little shortcomings she would set me adrift, and her pious old father would go off with the shock, while the governor would give me a row up Salt river."

"They know I am a little wild: sow my wild oats, and spend considerable money; but the notice my editor friend on the *Herald* gives me every now and then of sending a handsome sum to convert the heathen in Africa, helps me out with old Taff and his daughter, and accounts to the governor for a good deal of money I could not otherwise explain the going of."

"Curse the heathen!"

"No, no, I forget; bless the heathen, for they are a blessing to me."

"But I would like to know where Pauline is, for I cannot hold off much longer."

"I hope she has not gone to the bad."

"She had no friend in this country to go to, and only a brother, I believe, in Mexico, and she had not heard from him for a long time."

"Ah me, I must not think of her, for I get blue, and one of my nature should not get the blues."

"Ah! there comes the moon, and I'll saddle up and be off on my search for the Phantom Mazeppa."

He arose quickly, collected his traps, saddled his horse, and rode away across the prairie, now lighted by the rising moon.

Hardly had he ridden a league, when his horse gave a loud snort, and turning half round he started suddenly, for there, not a hundred yards away came the Phantom Mazeppa.

Wheeling quickly he unslung his rifle, and brought it round ready for use.

But, when the butt pressed his shoulder, he did not fire, and, from some impulse he could not account for, he lowered the weapon.

Then, like one gone dazed, he sat and saw the white steed fly by with a speed that was marvelous, heard the wild neighing of the animal, the maniacal laughter of the rider, and beheld the form bound to the back of the horse.

Away went the white steed, and Carter Conrad had not made an effort to get a nearer view or to check its flight.

Suddenly, as the wild beast disappeared over a roll of the prairie, he came to himself, and with a cry to his horse dashed off in pursuit.

"I will run alongside and see what that strange being is, for my noble horse will soon overtake them."

"What a fool I was not to shoot the horse; but I could not have fired then had my life depended upon it."

"Come, sir, come!"

But though the Kentucky racer went over the prairie at a pace that would have won applause at the English Derby, the phantom steed steadily gained on him, and in a very short time the surprised Carter Conrad drew rein with the remark:

"Well, that passes belief, and almost persuades me to believe that animal is from the spirit-land."

"Now, which way?"

"Go where you please, old fellow, and if the phantom again crosses our path I'll try cold lead."

And Fate led the racer by a trail that had a strange ending.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LAST OF A RACE.

SANCHO, the Mexican, sat alone in the Preston ranch, for his master had gone to the Platte with the prisoners, taken by the courage of Arta, his cousin.

As one studied the face of Sancho, it would improve in character and looks, for there was that in it which gave the idea of strength, resolution, and yet not devoid of art, though it was stamped with recklessness, dissipation, and a certain sadness, as though the thoughts were wont to go back to unpleasant scenes in the past, rather than to dwell in the present or hope for the future.

Some months before Sancho had reached the ranch, as chief cowboy of a herd driven up from Texas for Mr. Preston and had offered his services as herdsman, and was accepted as such.

He was found steady, industrious, quiet, and was liked by his employer, although there was something about him Ramsey Preston could not understand.

He had represented himself as a half breed, his mother having been an Indian, and his father a Mexican, and more regarding his antecedents he had nothing to say; but Mr. Preston soon found that he possessed a fine education, and had evidently been born to a different life.

Now, as he occupied his usual seat outside the cabin door, he was engaged in the manufacture

of a lariat, which he made with deft fingers, while his eyes often roamed over the magnificent sweep of prairie in his front.

Suddenly his eagle eyes fell upon some moving objects far away, and he said simply:

"Buffalo, or more cattle, for this country is settling up fast; yes, it is a herd of cattle, and they are following the trail for the Dismal."

Indifferently he watched the herd, a couple of hundred in number, with a dozen drivers, the cracking of whose whips distinctly reached his ears, and saw that they branched off to the left, when arriving within a league of the ranch.

But soon he observed that one of the drivers had separated himself from the others and was coming on alone to the ranch.

"Who can he be?"

Not being able to answer his own question Sancho arose and entered the cabin, and returned with a spy-glass.

Adjusting the focus he leveled it at the horseman, and looked long and intently.

"It is not the ranchero; no, nor do I know who it is."

"Ah! it is not a man, but a woman."

He lowered the glass and paced to and fro for an instant, and then again took an observation of the stranger.

"No, it is not the Señorita Preston; then who can it be?"

"Her face I cannot see, but her form looks youthful and she sits on a horse like a daughter of my dear sunny Mexico."

"Yes, she is veiled, and— *Madre de Dios!* should it be— No, no, no, there is no such joy for me; no Alcolo can ever again know joy, for dishonor is upon the name."

He passed his hand moodily across his brow, and again paced to and fro, so deeply lost in reverie as to have wholly forgotten the stranger coming toward the ranch.

But the hoof-fall on the prairie catching his quick ear, ever on the alert for danger, he started, cast from him the mantle of bygone memories that had enveloped him, and turned his gaze upon the horsewoman, who was now within twenty paces of him.

She was dressed in a Mexican riding-habit, and wore a broad-brimmed sombrero, half encircled by a black ostrich plume, while her face was securely hidden by a Spanish veil.

Riding directly up to Sancho she looked him in the face, as she drew rein, and asked in a low tone, in purest Spanish:

"Is this the ranch of Don Preston, an Americano, and ranchero?"

"It is, señorita," and Sancho touched his sombrero and in vain endeavored to pierce the veil and see the face beneath.

"Dwells there with Don Preston a Mexicano, known as Sancho?"

"I am Sancho, señorita," was the low reply.

"If I mistake not, here you are Sancho the Half-breed."

"Yes, señorita."

"There was a time when, as Gila Alcolo, you had pride—"

"Ha! who are you that mentions that name, señorita?" he asked, quickly.

"One who comes here as a friend of her whom you cast off; the friend of your sister."

"For the Blessed Virgin's sake, tell me of her, for it has been long since I have heard of her."

"Do you love her still?"

"Ay do I; what else have I to live for, for am I not the last of my race?" he said, bitterly.

"The last of your race; a great, a noble race, for well I know, Sancho the Half-breed, that thou art descended from the Aztecs on thy mother's side, and in thy father's veins flowed the purest Spanish blood."

"On yes, thou art a half-breed, Gila Alcolo, but thy ancestors once dwelt in the Palace of Axuzco in the land of the Montezumas, and were lords in those days."

"But thou, Sancho the Half-breed, art indeed fallen low when thou dost hide thy name, and art content to follow in the trail of cattle."

"*Nombre de Dios!* who are you that thus speaks to me?" and the Mexican's face grew black with rage.

"Thy sister; oh, Gila! do you not know thy sister Paulina?"

She threw herself from her horse as she spoke, and he caught her in his arms, while, tearing aside her veil, he beheld her wondrously beautiful face, the eyes brimful of tears.

For some moments neither spoke, and then, seating her by his side on the low bench at the cabin door, the man said:

"Paulina, twelve years ago a cruel fate drove us, the last of our race, from the Axuzco Palace, the home of our ancestors for twenty generations."

"I was one of the conspirators, as they called us who hoped to free our land from a tyrant, and I was condemned to die."

"But an Americano, a Texan, who was fighting on the other side, I had one time saved from death, and he set me free, and I escaped across the Rio Grande, and, destitute, friendless, reckless, I joined a band of outlaws under the chief Bianca."

"And, Paulina, he, the Americano who had done me this favor, did more, for, a soldier of

fortune, and a man of means, he sought you out and took you, then a little girl, to America, and his sister adopted you as her own child until I could claim you.

"But fate evilly dogged my way, Paulina, and I could not shake off the coil of sin around me, and you still remained with those kind friends, until at last a letter told me that you had fled from the boarding-school where they had placed you, and had become the wife of some ignoble man.

"Next, Paulina, I learned of the death of my American friend, that his good sister had gone to Europe, and that you, the last gem of the Alcolo, had soiled the bright plumage of your honor and gone down into the depths of infamy, dragged thither by him whom you had loved, honored and trusted.

"Paulina, I had sinned, driven to desperation by my misery and losses; but when this news came to me, that thou, my bright star-gem of Ix, had fallen, it was to me the *Itzai** that comes to our race to warn us of death.

"And then, Paulina, I swore to go to the far Northern land and seek out him who had done you this wrong and put my knife in his heart."

The man spoke savagely, and for the first time, while he had been speaking, Paulina Alcolo raised her eyes to his.

Then she said slowly:

"Brother, those of our name have hot blood in our veins, and when I met one whom I loved, I left all to go with him.

"I believed he made me his wife, although he would not acknowledge me as such before the world.

When at last I found, through one of his intimate friends, that he had wronged me, oh! most cruelly wronged me, by a false marriage, hiring a tool for the ceremony as evil as he was, then I left him and I came to seek you, my brother, for, by a strange circumstance I found you through one of Carter Conrad's friends that had met you in Texas, and whom you had nursed through a long illness—"

"Ha! Roscoe Hume?"

"Yes."

"A noble man, indeed; yes, he was with a hunting-party in Texas, and, wounded by an Indian, lay long weeks in a hacienda, and I cared for him, and learned to love him as a brother; but how knew he, Paulina, that you were my sister?"

"He did not know it; but I heard him, in his visits to Carter Conrad, tell of you, and of your real name, and I kept in my heart your assumed title of Sancho, the Half-breed, and where was the hacienda where you lived.

"And there I went, to find that you had come here, and with an army train coming to Fort McPherson I came all the way from your old home on the Red river, and there some cattle-men said they would show me the ranch of Don Preston, the ranchero, and here I am, brother Gila, to part with you no more—Holy Mother! look there!"

And just then, around the corner of the cabin, having approached across the prairie, hidden from view by the ranch buildings, rode a horseman, upon whom Paulina gazed with blazing eyes, while she cried, in a trembling voice:

"Brother, that man is Carter Conrad, who brought dishonor upon me."

CHAPTER XXXV.

ARTA PRESTON TO THE RESCUE.

AFTER his unsuccessful chase of the Phantom Mazeppa, Carter Conrad had roamed along at the will of his horse, until daydawn, and then sought a camping-place upon the banks of the Birdwood.

Assured that he would not see the Phantom Mazeppa before night, he settled himself for a day's sleep; but in the afternoon he awoke, and being ill at ease saddled his horse and started once more on his wandering, still leaving it to the will of the animal which way to go.

After a ride of an hour or so, he beheld in the distance buildings that he knew belonged to the ranch of some cattle man, and thither his horse went.

As he approached from the rear he saw no one in sight, but chickens that roamed near by, and other evidences were visible to show that the ranch was not deserted.

"I can learn here, if there is any one at home, if the Phantom Mazeppa is ever seen in this locality at night," he muttered, as he rode straight for the larger cabin, unconscious that there was a steed and rider coming close upon his trail, for the instinct of a thorough plainsman causes him to keep an occasional eye behind him, as well as in front, and Carter Conrad had neglected this precaution.

When he turned the corner of the cabin and beheld two persons spring to their feet, and in one of them saw the beautiful woman whom he had called his wife, he was dumb with amazement, a dead on his horse like a statue, while Paulina made the fearful charge against him to her brother.

And, at her words, Gila Alcolo, as I will now call him, grew livid with rage, the veins on his

temples swelled like whipcords, his lips were parted and his snowy, even teeth glistened between them, while his eyes seemed to fairly flash fire.

With a great effort he suppressed the emotion that welled up into heart and brain, almost overpowering him, and gazed upon Carter Conrad, who had drawn rein suddenly, and then, as his eyes fell upon the woman to whom he had cruelly refused his name, had cried:

"Paulina! you here?"

"Yes, and my brother, Gila Alcolo, is now my protector," she answered, proudly.

"Your brother?"

"Yes, I am Gila Alcolo, the Mexican conspirator that was; now I am known as Sancho the Half-breed.

"You are Carter Conrad, an Americano, I believe."

Words could not express the tone of sarcasm in which the Mexican spoke, and the American's face flushed and then paled; but he answered quietly:

"Yes, I am Carter Conrad, and I am an American."

"And a villain."

"Sir!"

"I repeat it, you are Carter Conrad, an American, and a villain and a coward," and the Mexican fairly hissed the words.

As I have before said, Carter Conrad, whatever his faults might be, was no coward, and at the insult of the Mexican, he threw himself from his horse and advanced upon him with drawn knife, at the same time saying coolly:

"Señor Mexican, for those words hurled in my teeth I will have your accursed life."

"Señor, taking a life is a game that two can play at, if one is not an assassin.

"Come on, and I will meet you as you please, and wipe out the stain that you brought upon the name of Alcolo, when you deceived that poor girl."

The Mexican had drawn his knife as he spoke, and advanced toward the American, who was prepared to meet him, while Paulina, with a frightened cry, sunk down upon her knees, and then dropped down in a heap, wholly unconscious, just as the two blades crossed.

Both men were fine specimens of athletic manhood, and though the American was the larger of the two, the Mexican was the most wiry; but in the faces of both seemed a determination to kill the other.

With the first clash of the knives Carter Conrad felt that he had made a mistake in drawing a blade, and wished that he had used a revolver, for the Mexican seemed a master at an encounter of the kind, and his movements were as quick as lightning.

Step by step he forced the American back, for Carter Conrad could do no more than parry his thrusts and act wholly in self-defense, and seeming to warm with his work, he, by a marvelously quick and skillful movement, struck the knife from the hand of his antagonist.

Instantly Carter Conrad stood like a statue, and said calmly:

"I am at your mercy: do not kill me."

He could have drawn a revolver from his belt, but having been disarmed in fair combat, he scorned to do so.

"And I intend to drive my knife to your heart and avenge my sister's honor," hissed the Mexican, and springing forward he raised the fatal knife, at the same time clutching Carter Conrad by the throat with a gripe he could not shake off.

Another instant and the days of Carter Conrad would have been ended there and then; but there came a sharp report, a curse, and the knife fell from the hand of the Mexican, and his arm fell to his side helpless.

Like a wounded tiger he turned upon the one who had fired the shot, and beheld Arta Preston seated in her saddle, and with her smoking revolver still covering him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN THE TOILS.

"SEÑORITA! señorita, have you done me this wrong?"

It was the Mexican that spoke, and he turned his large eyes with sad reproach upon the maiden, while his sister, recovering consciousness, half arose and gazed upon the scene.

"I am sorry, Sancho, very sorry, but I heard that gentleman say he was at your mercy, and beg you not to kill him, and like a tiger you sprung upon him, and I fired to save his life," Arta answered, calmly, though she was very pale.

"Yes, you fired upon me and have shattered my arm; señorita, you are the friend of this man, and not my friend," said the Mexican, in the same reproachful tones.

"I meant not to kill you, Sancho; but when I called to you, you heeded me not, and I fired to knock the knife from your hand; come, let me dress the wound for you," and she slipped to the ground, and going up to him laid her small hand upon his wounded arm.

But he drew back and said, sternly:

"Señorita, you have injured me, and saved

the life of one who dragged my sister, that poor girl crouching there in grief, down to shame."

Arta started and glanced at Carter Conrad, who had stood in silence gazing upon the two, and her face flushed as she said, in cold, distinct tones:

"Mr. Conrad, when I rode up here I recognized you, and yet, though some months ago you rudely offered me insult in front of your club one night, I sought to save you; but now, when I hear what this man says, I regret that I saved your life."

"Ha! now I recall your face, for I wondered where I had met you before, and most humbly I beg pardon for the past and crave your mercy, lady," he said, in a low, earnest tone, advancing a step nearer to her.

"I can forgive you the insult, for having saved your life is my revenge; but, oh, sir! what atonement can you offer that poor girl, whom you have wronged so cruelly?" answered Arta, with deep feeling.

"Wronged, yes, I admit it, for though I married her, I held our union a secret from the world."

"Married me, Carter Conrad; ay, but your vows were as false as the ceremony that united us, and the heart of the tool whom you hired to do your bidding," and springing to her feet Paulina confronted the young man with indignation in every feature of her pallid, beautiful face.

"Now, Paulina, you wrong me, for, wicked though I am, denying you my rightful name, I am not so evil, so false to myself as to wrong you as you say, and I here swear that, before God and man, you are my wedded wife."

There was no mistaking the truth of what Carter Conrad said, for his words and looks testified to it, and with a cry of joy Paulina sprung toward him, while Gila Alcolo stepping forward extended his left hand and said, earnestly:

"Señor, appearances were against you, and I was hasty; act like a man of honor toward this girl and we are friends."

"One word, Paulina; who told you that I had falsely married you?" and there was a dangerous light flashing up in the eyes of Carter Conrad.

"Your intimate friend, Benton Vail."

"Benton Vail! Ah, indeed! now I understand many little things I did not before, and remember that he was always most attentive to you; but, by Heaven, he shall eat that lie, for Roscoe Hume, as you know, Paulina, was the witness to our secret wedding, and he engaged the minister that married us."

"Ah, my old friend, Señor Hume? Then no longer can I doubt."

"Pardon me, but we owe it to the Señor Sancho to attend to his wound, for he is suffering," and Arta approached the Mexican, while Carter Conrad said, quickly:

"As this wound was given to save my life, señor, permit me to become your physician, as medicine was the profession I was intended to follow, and I am a graduate."

Gila Alcolo made no resistance, the sleeves were cut from the arm, and the wound was examined with the eye of one who understood what he was about.

Going to his saddle Carter Conrad took from the saddle-pack a small case of surgical instruments, and probing the wound, while the Mexican never flinched, he said:

"The ball struck the bone, but did not break it, though the shock was a severe one; here is the bullet caught in the flesh near the elbow; I can at once take it out, but am sorry I have nothing to give you to kill pain."

"I do not care for it; I have often been wounded before; cut away, señor," was the stoical reply.

Instantly the incision was made, the Mexican not giving a quiver, the ball was extracted, and the wound carefully and skillfully dressed, and Carter Conrad remarked:

"Now you will get along all right, but I am very sorry you received the wound."

"Better so, señor, than that I should have taken your life believing you guilty of a wrong you were not guilty of," was the frank reply.

Carter Conrad made no reply, but turning to Arta, said:

"Miss Preston, what can I do to prove how fully I appreciate I owe to you my life?"

Arta glanced at Paulina and asked:

"Do you love your wife, sir?"

"I do, and feel it now more than ever."

"Then give her the open love and name you have hitherto withheld from her."

"Willingly; I will write the governor—I mean my father, upon my return to North Platte, and tell him I am married to as sweet a little woman as walks the green earth."

"If he cuts me off without a dollar, my ranch and cattle here, Paulina, will support us; will you forget the past, Paulina, and live for the future?"

With a glad cry she sprung to his arms, and unwilling to be an observer of a scene so sacred, Arta turned to Gila Alcolo and said:

"Señor, I rode hither in search of my father, who left home early for a short hunt, and did not return as he promised, and I thought

* A messenger of death believed in by Mexicans.
—THE AUTHOR.

he must have ridden over here to see cousin Ramsey."

"No, señorita, he has not been here, and the Don is still absent, having gone to Platte with the prisoners you so bravely captured; I congratulate you upon your wonderful nerve, señorita."

Arta blushed at the compliment, but her anxiety regarding her father caused her to decide upon at once returning to her ranch, and she said:

"If he is not there, then I shall leave a note on the door for him, and return here."

"Permit me to go in your stead," asked Carter Conrad.

"Oh no, I will enjoy the gallop; I will be back by dark if father is not at home," and with a wave of her hand in farewell, she darted away over the prairie.

At a rapid gallop she held her way for miles, until she reached the Birdwood, and then turned down the stream toward her home.

But hardly had she ridden a score of lengths when from the cottonwoods and willows suddenly sprung half a dozen forms, a lasso settled over the head of Red Ranger, securing him firmly, and with horror Arta Preston gazed into the hideously-painted faces of her red-skin captors.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"IT'S AN ILL WIND THAT BLOWS NOBODY GOOD."

Two men lay at ease upon the sloping bank of the Birdwood, just where a shady glen broke off at the river.

The sloping hillsides were dotted with flowers, the birds sung merrily in the trees, the banks, covered with ferns, formed a soft resting-place, and the river before them glided on with low murmuring, and far down in its clear depths were seen fishes sporting without fear of the angler's hook.

Back in the ravine, or glen, were two horses, lariatd to stakes, and enjoying to their stomach's content the luscious grass, and occasionally taking a sip of the cool waters of a spring that bubbled up out of the green hillside.

"Your Texans should now be here, Mr. De Leon," said the elder of the two men, and in whom the reader will recognize Merton Mabrey, senior; but upon whose face rested a more cheerful look than when, several days before he was in the cottonwood grove, by the side of what he deemed his son's grave.

"Yes, for Star must have found Fielding and the party he said were searching for me, and I hope that they will not long delay, for I am anxious to return to North Platte, and do not care to go unless I have backers, as I intend to carry out certain reforms," replied Iron Arm, the Ranchero, who was the other one of the two men resting upon the Birdwood's banks.

The two, after leaving the cottonwood grove, had gone to the ranch of Lucien De Leon, on the Dismal, and had been told by Star, one of the herders, that Fielding had turned back from the drove to go in search of him.

Wishing for the present not to clear the mystery of his disappearance, Iron Arm dispatched Star after Frank Fielding, with orders for them to meet him on the Birdwood, and hither he and Mr. Mabrey had gone to await the coming of the Texans.

And while they sat there, both impatient at the delay of the mustangers, they were startled by loud shouts coming from the trail over the hill.

Instantly Iron Arm sprung to his feet, and, calling to his companions to saddle their horses, dashed up the hillside and disappeared.

He was gone but a short time, and returning, said, quickly:

"There is deviltry going on over on the trail down the Birdwood, for half a dozen Indians have captured a lady."

"A lady, De Leon?"

"Yes, she was on horseback and is now their prisoner; they have headed up the trail, but we can cross here and head them off at the crossing ten miles above."

"But what lady can be here?"

"There is but one that I can think of, and that is Miss Preston, who came west with the train your son—"

"Ah! I remember your speaking of her. Then come, let us to her rescue," and the two men quickly mounted, urged their horses into the stream, and crossing to the other side, headed up the river, keeping behind the sand-hills as much as was possible.

A rapid gallop, and they reached a trail that had fresh tracks upon it, and here they drew rein.

"Seven horses have gone along here within the last few hours, and they must be the same party I saw, so here we will await their return."

Concealing their horses and themselves in a ravine bordered with a small thicket, they waited for some time, and the Indians not appearing in sight, Iron Arm ascended a sand-hill and glanced cautiously over the prairie.

That glance showed him the party he looked for, and, descending, he said:

"Mr. Mabrey, they are coming, and there are

seven of them; but, if I mistake not, they are simply playing Indian."

"Playing Indian, De Leon?"

"Yes; they have the look, to my eye, of white men disguised as Indians; but in their midst they have the prisoner, and I shall attack them."

"Seven to two."

"I have taken greater odds, and my plan is for you to remain here with my repeating rifle while I charge them from the end of this ravine."

"Your fire and my charge will throw them into disorder, and, if I mistake not, we will gain the day."

"You take great chances."

"The prize is worth it, for the lady is Arta Preston," was the calm rejoinder.

"I am at your service in the matter, De Leon, so command me."

"Very well; you can see me when I ride out of the ravine, so then open upon the devils, and make every shot tell; but do not kill the large man on the iron-gray, for I have an idea I know him."

No saying, Iron Arm handed his repeating rifle to his companion, and, mounting Flash, rode down the ravine.

He had scarcely reached his place of concealment when the enemy arrived in sight.

First came a large man, dressed as a chief, and mounted upon an iron-gray horse, and by his side rode the fair prisoner, her hands bound with a lariat, and her head bent as though in utter dejection.

Behind these, two-and-two, rode six other horsemen, all in war-paint and feathers.

Iron Arm took a revolver in each hand, settled himself well in his saddle, and waited until the rest of the party had passed the mouth of the ravine.

And then, with a ringing war-cry that struck awe to the party of kidnappers, he dashed out upon them.

And, as he left his covert, a shot was heard, and one of the horses went down.

Taken wholly by surprise, and attacked from two quarters, while they were in the pass between the sand-hills, and could only fly up the steep ascent on either side, the horsemen huddled together for defense.

But right upon them rode Iron Arm, his revolvers rattling merrily, and his bullets dropping here a mustang, there a rider, while his repeating rifle, in the hands of Mr. Mabrey, was pouring in a hot fire that utterly demoralized the survivors, and up the steep ascent to the right darted the three remaining horsemen.

A few bounds only had the large iron-gray taken, with his rider leading the captive's horse, when Iron Arm dashed alongside, escaping the fire turned upon him, and, leveling a pistol at his head, said, sternly:

"Draw rein, or you die!"

"I draw rein in preference ter passin' in checks any time, pard," was the characteristic remark of the supposed chief, and Iron Arm, as the three horses came to a halt, said, sternly:

"As I thought, you are that devil, Grizzly Gabe."

"And you is ther feller I thought was dead meat; but yer isn't, I see."

"No, nor will I die until I see you hanged, and this last act of yours has run your head into the noose. Come, Mr. Mabrey, and we will tie this painted renegade," called out Iron Arm, as his companion approached, having fired at the three escaping fugitives as long as they were in sight.

"Save trouble to tie the rope around his neck," said the old man, bluntly.

"True, but the boys would not forgive me if I deprived them of the sport of hanging him; there, now, Mr. Grizzly Gabe, I think you will do," and having bound the desperado firmly Iron Arm turned to the now happy Arta, and, raising his hat, said, politely:

"We meet again, Miss Preston."

"Yes, sir, and under circumstances where, as usual, I am under obligations for services rendered: oh, sir, how can I thank you?" and Arta's magnificent eyes filled with tears.

"By not referring to any service that it has been my pleasure to do you; there, now you are free from the bonds these devils placed upon you; but may I ask why it was that you were alone upon the prairie, for I saw your capture?" and Iron Arm told of their being in the Birdwood when Grizzly Gabe and his followers set upon her, and he introduced Mr. Mabrey, telling her in a few words who he was.

Arta warmly greeted the old man, and told her two rescuers about the absence of her father from home, and of her having ridden over to the ranch of Ramsey Preston in search of him.

And also, as she rode ahead with Iron Arm on their way back down the Birdwood, for they started as soon as the dead renegades had been hastily buried in the ravine, she told of the scene at the Preston ranch, and of her participation in it.

The young man seemed surprised at what he heard, and remarked:

"Well, I am glad that Carter Conrad has at last had the manliness to acknowledge his beautiful wife."

"You know her, then?" said Arta, also surprised.

"Yes, I met her once."

"And do you know her husband?" and Arta fixed her eyes full upon his face.

"Yes, we met once, also, though not under pleasant circumstances, I assure you."

"Will you tell me of your meeting?" and her gaze seemed to fascinate him.

"Oh, yes; it was some months ago, when I was in Boston, I heard a young girl singing in front of a fashionable club-house."

"Struck by the exquisite beauty of her voice, I paused to listen, and was witness to an insult offered her by Carter Conrad, who had raised a considerable sum, I believe, to give to her."

"In my usual impulsive style I resented the insult, and the result was a challenge from Conrad, which I accepted."

"A challenge, and a duel followed?" she asked, quickly.

"No, for I had a visitor who proved to be none other than Conrad's wife, and she begged me not to meet her husband, and I did not, and at once left the city."

"Mr. De Leon, you are a noble man."

"Thank you."

"May I ask," continued Arta, blushing at her own impulsiveness, "if you knew the singer?"

"I did not, though her voice had a most familiar ring, and, I may say, Miss Preston, was strangely like the tones of your voice, as it was when I heard you sing years ago, for our meeting at Dave Perry's the other night, when you were disguised as a boy, was not our first meeting."

"Did you think I had forgotten you, for a moment to think so?" she asked, in a low tone.

"I hoped not, though I feared so; your father told Perry that you were his daughter, though dressed as a boy, and I had already discovered the secret, for I recognized you from the door, and that is why I entered and acted as I did."

"And from what did you not save my father and myself?"

"But I will not speak of that, now, but tell you a secret."

"I am all attention, Miss Preston."

"When you visited our humble home for a few days, I was in my fourteenth year, you may remember?"

"Yes."

"Five years after I saw you and recognized you."

"Indeed! where was it, may I ask?" and he looked surprised.

"One night, some months since, in front of a club-house in Boston."

"By Heaven! then my ear did not deceive me; it was your voice!" he said, hastily.

"Yes, and I will tell you why I was there, and how the beautiful gift you sent me long ago, helped my father and myself in our poverty and distress, though it nearly broke my heart to part with it," and Arta told the story of her sufferings, and the selling of her guitar.

"Miss Preston, I saw that guitar in Leavenworth, recognized it, heard from whom the shopman had bought it, and I purchased it from him to one day restore it to you."

"It was to see you that I followed your train and came on alone to North Platte, instead of joining my Texas comrades and the herd on the Arkansas river, as I originally intended to do."

Arta tried to speak, but her words would not find utterance, and the tears came in her beautiful eyes, and, as they were some distance in front of Mr. Mabrey and his prisoner, Lucien De Leon continued, in his low, earnest tones:

"Miss Preston, circumstances of an unpleasant nature made me a Texas plainsman, and once, following the bent of my reckless humor, I rode on horseback through many of the States."

"It was then that I met you, and, girl though you were, your image went with me back to the mountains and prairies of Texas; I saw your face in the coals of my lonely camp fire, I heard your voice in the sweet singing of the birds, and as my heart losing the love of a half-sister I had made my idol from boyhood, treasured you in her place, and as I was coming to Nebraska, partly on an important duty, and to settle here as a ranchero, I determined to let my herd come on under Frank Fielding, my partner, while I ran East by rail to see if the girl had grown to womanhood all that I believed she would."

"Alas! I found others in the old house where I had passed three happy days, and was told that you and your father had gone, no one knew where."

"Unable to find you, on my way west, the guitar in the shop window at Leavenworth gave me your trail, and thank God I arrived in time to be of service to the one idol of my heart, for, Arta, you are to me all that I say you are, and have been, ever since you were a little girl."

"Arta, have you ever thought of me?"

He turned the full fascination of his gaze upon her, and holding out her hand, she said softly:

"Even as the man loved the little girl, she loved him, and each year has but added to her love for him, until now he is in her eyes all that man can be in the eyes of the woman who loves him and never has, never can love another."

"Arta, God bless you."

It was all he said, and they rode on in silence together, until the quick eye of Iron Arm detected some moving forms in the cottonwoods and willows that fringed the banks of the Birdwood.

Instantly he drew rein; but a moment after moved on once more, saying pleasantly:

"Come on, Mr. Mabrey, for they are my Texans," and he added in a low tone:

"Now the doom of Grizzly Gabe is sealed."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

OUT OF THE QUICKSAND.

THE reader will remember that after the escape of Grizzly Gabe and Bedrock Mose from the jail, that Tiny Tim, the Dandy Sport, had coolly pocketed a handsome sum of money, by telling who had impersonated the Phantom Mazeppa, and then, at a threat from Ramsey Preston, had, as though by mistake, called him by a name that had caused him to start suddenly, and then seek an interview with the young gambler.

With a sinister smile Tiny Tim faced the two, when they were alone in the hotel together, and asked:

"How liked you the *lapsus lingue* I made?"

"You called me by the name of one who is a terror in Texas."

"Yes, and you were that terror until Texas got too hot for you, and you came here, Bianca, the Hyena of the Chaparrals," was the bold response.

"And in Satan's name who are you?" asked the ranchero, in fierce tones, while his face had turned to the hue of a corpse.

"I am one who started out with splendid prospects in life, but found my possibilities for evil-doing greater than for good, and I went to the bad, and I keep it up from sheer devilry of nature, a love of revenge and an intense desire for the excitement which wickedness and danger bring."

"Your face is strangely familiar to me, but your words do not tell me who you are."

"Well, perhaps before we part company you will know; invite me to your ranch with you, Bianca."

"Curse you! don't call me by that name."

"Very well, Ranchero Preston, I have a desire to become your guest for a few days."

"Return with me then to the ranch for a run after elk."

"I will go with pleasure; when do you start?"

"Within the hour."

"I will be ready, Bianca—ah! I forgot—I mean Ranchero Preston," and with a light laugh the Dandy Sport left the room.

But an hour after he was seated on his horse in front of the Overland Rest, and being joined by the cattle-king the two set off for the ranch of Ramsey Preston.

Hardly had they crossed the Platte and borne away to the north, when a party of horsemen were visible in the early dawn coming down the river; but one party only saw the other, while the ranchero and Dandy Sport little dreamed who were so near them.

Crossing the river they entered the town in the early dawn, and halted in front of the Overland Rest, when one of their number dismounted, and going to the sleeping-room of Dave Perry knocked.

It was opened by the proprietor of the Overland, who, with his usual caution, covered the visitor with his revolver.

"It is I, Perry, and I have come for you to accompany us."

"Saints sing Psalms! De Leon, it is you, indeed; I feared you were dead; come in, old fellow."

"No, thank you, for I have not time; my Texans are waiting yonder, and we have a chase on hand, and I wish you to be in at the death."

Impressed by the manner of Iron Arm, Dave Perry called to his Chinese servant to get his horse, and hastily dressing, was soon at the head of the Texans, and learning from De Leon the cause of this strange move.

"You see, Dave, there have been strange things going on up in the vicinity of the Birdwood," said Iron Arm, "for Carter Conrad, who went hunting for the Phantom Mazeppa, found a wife on his trail, and has since then made some interesting discoveries, through the aid of Don Gila Alcolo, a Mexican, who has been a kind of servant to Ramsey Preston, but who in reality is an exiled conspirator of good family."

"Then, that accursed Grizzly Gabe ran off with Miss Arta Preston, but I rescued her, and captured him, and my boys have postponed hanging him on the principle of the more the merrier, and they expect to get more."

"It is to Grizzly Gabe I also owe my disappearance, and in my wanderings I made important discoveries that you will find develop with interest all round."

"And where is Gabe?"

"Some of my boys have him in our camp near Mr. Berkley Preston's ranch."

"And Miss Preston?"

"Is with her father at their ranch, and, by the way, the old gentleman got lost while hunting, but was found by my mustangers."

"And Ramsey Preston and that queer little

Satan, Dandy Sport, or Tiny Tim, have gone to-night to the former's ranch," said Dave.

"Yes, we saw them cross the river, but they were not as quick-eyed as they might be, and failed to see us; I recognized them with my glass in the moonlight! but, hark! is not that a cry from the river?"

All drew rein and listened, and distinctly came the cry, as from the shallow waters of the North Platte:

"Help! Help!"

"There has some one gotten caught in the quicksand," cried Dave Perry, and, like one man, the half-score of horsemen bounded forward, and were soon crossing the river toward the other shore.

About one-third across, and some little distance below the regular crossing, was visible a dark object in the moonlight.

"It is a horse and rider; quick, and we may save him, for he saw us and called for help," cried Dave Perry.

On the Texans went, but warned by Dave Perry, who knew well the treacherous nature of the sands, they halted in the regular crossing, lariats were tied together, and one of the herders slipped from his horse and rode to the rescue.

To save the man was comparatively an easy task, for he was only in the quicksand up to his knees, and was soon drawn out; but the task of saving the horse was a difficult one, though at last accomplished, and steed and rider were soon landed upon the shore from which they had started.

There they halted, and the rescued man said, in suppressed tones:

"Lucien De Leon, to you, and your friends, I owe my life."

"Yes, Merton Mabrey," was the quiet reply, though Iron Arm seemed deeply moved.

"I have known that of late years you have sought my life, De Leon," said Merton Mabrey.

"Yes, I have longed to meet you."

"And is it war between us now?"

"No, for I find I have wronged you, Mabrey."

"Thank God you at last know the truth," was the earnest ejaculation, and the two men grasped hands, and, as they rode on together, Merton Mabrey heard that from the lips of his old foe that brought joy to his heart.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

UNINVITED GUESTS.

WITH the exception of seeing the Phantom Mazeppa dash by them in the moonlight, with the same wild neighing of her horse, and her mocking laughter, and being in nowise anxious to pursue her, Ramsey Preston, the Ranchero, and Tiny Tim, the Dandy Sport, arrived at the ranch of the former without adventure.

Sancho, with his hand in a sling, and his face pale, welcomed them, and then set about preparing supper, as well as he could with his wounded arm, and which wound he accounted for by saying a pistol had gone off and shot him.

"You certainly have shown great skill in dressing it by yourself," remarked the ranchero, with suspicion.

"The Señorita Preston rode over this afternoon, and kindly dressed it for me."

"Ah! that accounts for it; how is my sweet cousin?"

"Quite well, señor; she said she and her father would perhaps ride over to-night, or in the morning."

"I hope they will; they are the ones, Dandy Sport, you mistook for the persons who had killed your pard; Mabrey, I believe was his name; well, Sancho, is supper about ready?"

"Yes, señor," and the two sat down to their meal, which was certainly a most tempting one for a prairie repast.

After supper Ranchero Preston smoked his pipe in front of the cabin and chatted with Tiny Tim, while Sancho busied himself with the household duties, but quite often went to the rear of the cabin and glanced out over the prairie.

At last he seemed to discover what he was looking for, as he returned to the cabin muttering:

"They are coming; now for the curtain to rise upon a tragedy."

A few moments after Ramsey Preston and the Dandy Sport sprang suddenly to their feet, both with their hands upon their weapons, for around the corner of the cabin rode two persons.

"Ah! it is you, cousin, and you, too, Arta; I am both honored and delighted by your coming," said the ranchero, and he arose to aid Arta to dismount, when, from around the other end of the cabin darted a number of forms, and in an instant the ranchero and the Dandy Sport found themselves in clutches they could not shake off.

"What! villains, who are you? Cousin Berkley, do you stand there and look calmly on this outrage?" cried Ramsey Preston, savagely.

"That gentleman, sir, will explain whether it is an outrage to place you in bonds," replied Berkley Preston, sternly, and he pointed to Iron Arm, who stepped forward from the group of Texans who had, with him, bound both the ranchero and Tiny Tim.

"And who are you, sir, that commits this outrage?" demanded the ranchero.

"Men call me Iron Arm, the Ranchero, sir, but my name is Lucien De Leon. I am a Texas cattleman, and I have been on your trail ever since eight years ago you pillaged my father's home, and made my half-sister and myself fatherless; do you know me now?"

"No, for you are mistaken in the man. I am Ramsey Preston, the cousin of that gentleman, who knows me well," and he pointed to Berkley Preston, who answered:

"Yes, you are my cousin, I shame to say it, but you are not Ramsey Preston, but his twin-brother, Bianca, who went to the bad when a boy, and whom I believed dead long ago," said Berkley Preston.

"It is a lie; I am Ramsey Preston," shouted the man, in a fury.

"Then who am I, Bianca?"

A man came forward and confronted the ranchero; a man startlingly like the prisoner, only that his face was white and haggard.

"Good God! does the grave give up its dead?" groaned the bound man.

"No, for yonder grave on the prairie never held my body, Bianca, as, when you shot me down in cold blood, the bullet glanced on a rib and did not kill me, while, thanks to this kind Mexican, the grave was filled in, and I was hidden away in yonder outhouse, and nursed back to life, that now I might confront you," said Ramsey Preston, as he is now known to be, speaking in a low, sad tone.

"I say you lie; I am Ramsey, you are Bianca."

"Ah, brother, it is useless for you to say this, for you remember long ago, when boys, to know us apart, our dead mother put our names on our arms in India ink; here is the name of Ramsey on my arm," and the speaker raised his sleeve, and the name was easily read in the moonlight, while the prisoner groaned aloud, as his brother continued:

"You, Bianca, wronged me in childhood, and, possessing an evil heart, became worse as you grew in years, until you fled from home a murderer."

"Returning, in my absence, you married the very maiden to whom I was engaged, for, as I had been away for a year, you deceived her into the belief that you were me; finding out her fatal error she clung to you, hoping to redeem you from your evil life; but you sunk lower and lower, and at last I sought to find her."

"At first she would not listen to my entreaties to leave you; but at last yielding we fled from you and came hither, and that you should not find us ever, we inhospitably turned from our door all who came."

"At last, through this man, Don Gila Alcolo, whom you know as Sancho, and sent on our trail, you found us."

"We felt we had wronged you, notwithstanding your wrongs to us, and we were content to accept the penalty; but oh, what a penalty!"

"To defend your ranch from a prowling band of Indians, you shot me down, and believed me dead; but before that you tied on the back of her own horse the noble woman whom you had so deceived, who rightly should have been my wife, and sent her off to die on the prairie."

"And, with her horse chased by wolves, and frightened by the way his mistress was tied upon him, he would have taken her to her death had not—"

"Great God! then she is not yet dead?" groaned Bianca.

"No, Bianca, the Hyena of the Chaparrals, the man whose name is a terror in Texas as an outlaw, and who came here to hide himself under the name of his brother, *I am not dead*, and there suddenly swept before the vision of the frightened man the slender, graceful form of Alita, his former wife."

"Alive! alive!" he almost shouted.

"Yes, thanks to this gentleman, whose horse was the only match that Phantom ever met, and who ran me down and saved me from death."

"Then, to punish you, I arranged, with his aid, a harness to support me reclining upon my horse, and, able to rise at will, Phantom was no longer afraid of me, and I guided him at will, and have I not made thy craven heart tremble with superstitious fear, Bianca?"

"And in making you fear, I have felt exquisite joy, as I sped over the prairies, and now I am here to see you die, for yonder men are Texans, and they know no mercy, for they came here to Nebraska to hunt you down; disguised as cowboys, for they drove their captain's herd here, you did not recognize the Rangers who had so often hunted you on the prairie, among the mountains and in the chaparrals; but they will be in at your death, Bianca, the Hyena."

The woman seemed to triumph in the hate she felt, and the revenge that would be gratified, and the man groaned pitifully:

"Among you all there is not one to pity me."

"It is said, Bianca, that misery loves company, and you shall have it, for a man here, no less the villain, but less the polished devil you

are, dies with you," said Iron Arm, stepping forward.

"Who is he?" eagerly asked the doomed man. "Grizzly Gabe is the name he has hidden his baptismal appellation under."

"Yes, pard; I goes under too; thar a pair o' us in ther same boat, an' I does wish as how thar was only one; but these heur Lone Star-rers say I is ter give in my chips, an' as they holds a full han' an' trumps ter boot, what are ther use o' kickin'?"

The philanthropy of Grizzly Gabe could not but win the admiration of his foes, and a murmur of approbation went round the crowd; but checking it, Iron Arm said:

"Bianca, I dislike to launch a man into eternity with the sins you have on your soul, but you deserve death in its worst form, and yet, as out of your villainess some good has come, I will be merciful."

"Some good, what good?" eagerly asked Bianca, while Grizzly Gabe said:

"Pard, ef yer kin git any good out o' me, yer is welcome to it fer a keepsake."

"The good that comes out of your wickedness is, first, that I, believing in the dishonor of a half-sister, Clarice Cordova, deeply loved by me, found that she was the wedded wife of Merton Mabrey here, and through following your trail north to Nebraska this good tidings came to my ears, while it also brought about this happy reunion of father and son, who had long been separated from each other."

"Second, it brought together Don Gila Alcolo and his lovely sister, and that sister and her husband, all of whom, though condemning you to death for your crimes, bless you as the means that united them."

"Third, your cousin, Berkley Preston, and his daughter, suffering through poverty, are now placed beyond want."

"For these blessings we are willing to say that you shall not die like a dog, with a rope around his neck, but be shot, as though you were worthy of that fate, and for his courage in the face of death, Grizzly Gabe shall die in the same manner."

"I thanks yer fer thet, pard, fer I never were partial ter tight cravats," coolly remarked the desperado.

"And I thank you for that mercy, though I curse you bitterly for the fate you have brought upon me," firmly responded Bianca.

"And now," said Iron Arm, unheeding the remark of the doomed man, "there is one here from whose face I wish to tear the mask."

"Fielding, bring forward the prisoner you have."

Frank Fielding quietly led Tiny Tim, the Dandy Sport, forward, and Iron Arm continued:

"This person is known as Tiny Tim, and for years the identity has been concealed even from Merton Mabrey here."

"Under the apparel of a man the form of a woman is concealed."

A murmur of intense surprise went round from every lip, while the accused drooped her head and trembled violently.

Continuing in his distinct, even tones, Iron Arm said:

"Mr. Mabrey, this woman is the one who wrecked your life and caused you to drive your son from your home as your intended murderer."

"Mr. Mabrey, junior, this is the woman who poisoned the mind, and broke the heart of your wife, my half-sister, Clarice Cordova, and caused her to take her own life; and more, this woman plotted to have your father kill you, and believed she had succeeded; but when you were dragged from your horse by the lasso of a road-agent, and, as he believed killed, he mounted your steed, and died in your stead, and thus the plot of this woman was thwarted by an accident, while you, half-delirious from the blows given you, unarmed and unthinking, roamed the prairies on a horse you found, and were brought back to yourself only by the danger of dying in a quicksand."

"Loving you, and hating you because you loved not her in return, this woman sought to do you all the harm in her power, and turning her venom upon Miss Preston, because of your friendship for her, she sought to have her and her father die at the hands of a mob to gratify her revenge."

"This woman and myself have met before, and I know her as she does me, and I say she is worse than the snake in the grass and more dangerous."

"I are a angil alongside o' her," broke in Grizzly Gabe, and it brought a laugh from the light-hearted, reckless Texas Rangers, while Iron Arm continued:

"Now, upon this woman I ask the justice here, Dave Perry, to pass condemnation for her crimes."

Dave Perry started at being called upon to pass judgment upon a woman, for never before had he had such a duty to perform; but he said in his off-hand way:

"I'll sentence her to prison for life, and send her there under Ben Fanshaw, for she is too dangerous to go at large."

"If that don't satisfy her, I'll get the Vigilantes to try her."

"The woman looked up quickly, and her glance first fell upon Merton Mabrey, senior, and she smiled bitterly; then she turned her eyes to his son, and said in a distinct voice:

"I loved you, Merton Mabrey, and that love you scorned and it was my ruin, for it made me the revengeful devil I am."

"And you, Lucien De Leon, have brought me to judgment, and I will, you my curse for so doing."

"Justice Perry, you have passed condemnation upon me living, but dead I am beyond your jurisdiction."

As the last word left her lips her right hand went quickly upward; a red flash momentarily paled the bright moonlight, and the woman who had so played the part of a fiend fell dead in her tracks.

A silence fell upon all, while Iron Arm knelt over the prostrate form.

Rising slowly he said sternly:

"She is dead; Fielding, lead those two men to execution."

"I needs no leadin', pard; I hes played my last keerd an' ther game are yourn," calmly said Grizzly Gabe, and placing himself by the side of Bianca, the two walked firmly a few feet distant, and turning, faced the half-score Texan Rangers who had ranged themselves in a double line, rifles in hand.

"Have you aught to say ere I give the word to fire?" asked Iron Arm.

Bianca, the Hyena, remained in stolid silence, but Grizzly Gabe said, in his characteristic way:

"I hes but two words ter say, an' them is, good-night, pard!"

"Fire!"

The word rung from the lips of Iron Arm, the ten rifles flashed, and Bianca, the Hyena, and Grizzly Gabe, the Platte desperado, fell dead in their tracks.

An hour more, and upon the open prairie, with no tree near to mark the spot, the moon shone brightly down upon three graves, and three wicked hearts were forever at rest.

CONCLUSION.

A word of the living characters of this story, and my romance has ended, kind reader.

True to his reformation, Carter Conrad wrote to his father of his marriage, and his intention to work for a support for himself and his wife.

But the letter was never seen by the eyes for which it was intended, as Mr. Conrad died of heart-disease ere it reached him, and consequently his son fell heir to his vast wealth, and yet dwells on his prairie ranch, preferring it to the wild life of the city.

And Birdie Taff, the one who forgetting his faults and his follies and loved him so well, mourned his desertion of her bitterly for one year, and then—married Roscoe Hume.

Gila Alcolo, once known as Sancho, the Half-breed, taking advantage of another revolution, returned to his native land, and is now a general of Lanceros in the army, with a prospect of being emperor or president in that tumultuous, ever fickle land of Mexico.

After the death of Bianca, the Hyena, a month or more, Ramsey Preston and Alita rode into North Platte and were secretly married by Justice Dave Perry, who, I may here say, is still a resident of that, at present, very flourishing town on the U. P. railroad, where years ago he so justly exercised his judicial functions.

Benton Vail, learning that it was the intention of Carter Conrad to hold him responsible for the false word he had told Pauline about him, levanted Eastward, and, dismissed from his club, is now jogging down-hill a bar-room loafer, with his aim a pauper's grave.

Berkley Preston, one time the millionaire, and then the bankrupt through the nobleness of his nature, dwells alone on the Birdwood Ranch, given him by his cousin Ramsey, for his beautiful daughter Arta is now Mrs. Lucien De Leon, and a handsomer couple no one would care to see than Iron Arm, the Ranchero, and his wife.

The Mabreys, father and son, returned to Texas with Lieutenant Frank Fielding and his Rangers, and are, I believe, in business together in some city on the Gulf.

Ben Fanshaw, the constable, was killed doing his duty, and it so impressed Gospel Luke that he repented of his manifold sins, rejoined the church, bought a hand-organ and uniform, and with one arm buttoned under his coat, plays "old soldier" from town to town.

Exeunt omnes.

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